



“THE BROWN BIRD.”

AND HER
OWNERS

Edith Cooper



**THE
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Frontispiece.]

“Hurrah, Dave, we’ve done it.”

[*page 114.*

'THE BROWN BIRD'

AND HER OWNERS

A STORY OF ADVENTURE OFF THE SOUTH COAST

BY

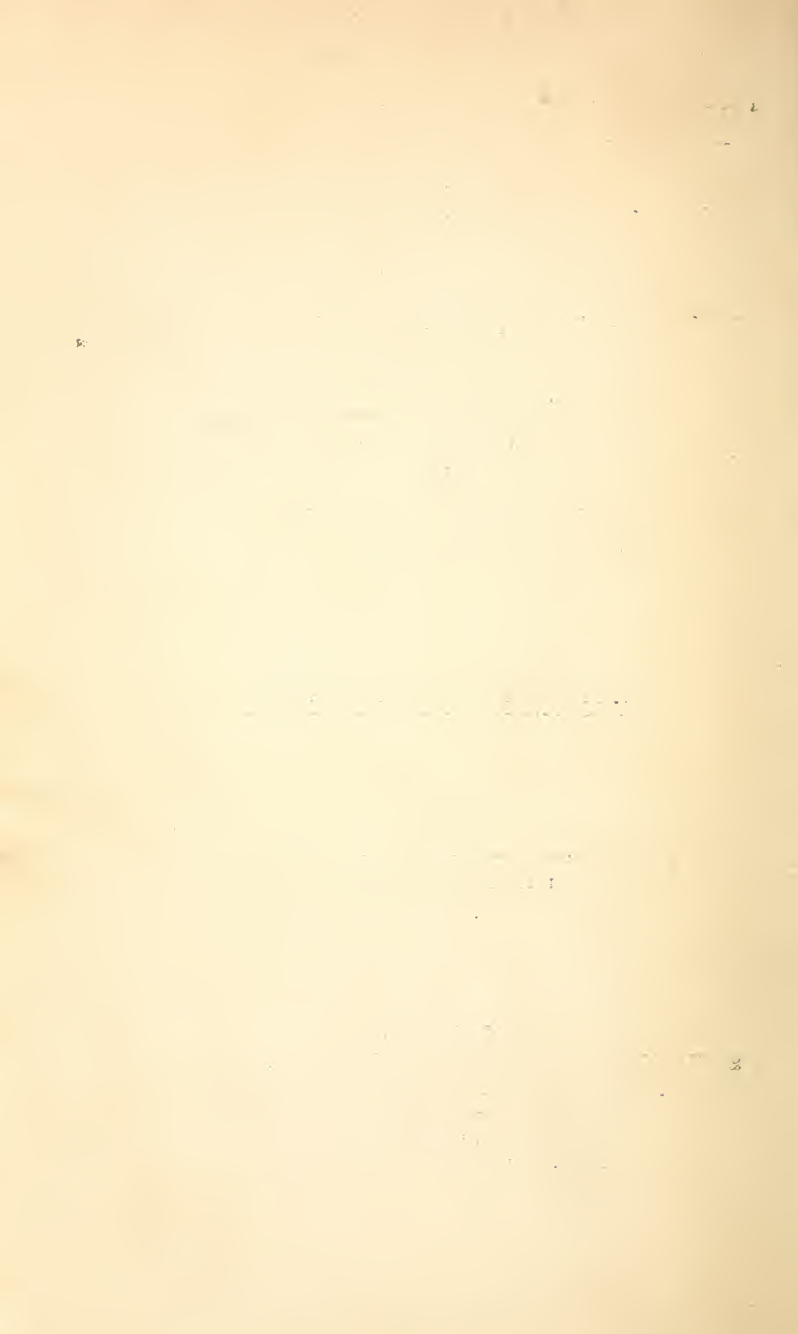
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'THE BROWN BIRD'

CHAPTER I

THE NEW-COMERS

IN that part of the south coast where the long rolling waves of bare downs meet the long rolling waves of restless sea coming in from the big ocean, with a harsh front of black cliffs, there is a break in the frowning wall, a break not observable from the sea till you are close to it, called Durlmouth Cove.

The formation of this cove is perhaps one of the strangest freaks of nature that exists along that dangerous coast, and is like nothing so much as a downward dig with a giant cheese-scoop, a well in the down, as it were, with a narrow opening in the cliff seaward, flanked on either side by sheer walls of rock.

The circle of the cove is small, and surrounded by towering heights of bare downs, brown and slippery for the greater part of each year; the rough beach at the foot shelving steeply to the water, which is of singular clearness and depth. Even a southerly or sou'-westerly gale does not penetrate the cove with any great force. The teeth and claws of the storm-fiend

tear at the black barrier outside, the long waves race up from the wide sou'-west and dash themselves on its battered foot, hurling spray right up to the little coast-guard "look-out" on the top; but the cove, hidden behind that repellent wall, remains undisturbed but for restless heavings, and a deep angry answer from the imprisoned waves to the wild brothers outside.

But the surprises of Durlmouth Cove do not end here. A gash in the downs reveals a narrow winding river, penetrating for a short distance parallel with the sea, and then striking inland for another short distance, dwindling away with an uncertain stream that rambles down a valley between the hills. Nothing could be more unexpected than certain parts of the south coast whose outside bays are only the beginning of revelations in the way of lovely wooded river creeks, and inland bays as peaceful and quiet as lakes of the most sheltered description, and certainly Durlmouth Cove to the full realizes this character.

It has no prospect of being developed, far from town and rail, and its importance, small as it is, is owing to the fact that it is the only shelter possible in a long stretch of dangerous coast lying between two frowning headlands that stand boldly out to sea, running long spurs of broken rocks far out under the water, like the rams of massive ironclads. Black Rock Bill and the Durl Head, the first to the west and the latter to the east, form the extreme points of this long bare sweep of open coast, and he who is caught between has no chance of life but in Durlmouth Cove. This solitary feature had given the cove a fictitious importance, and it was often crowded with craft of many kinds. This had led to a springing up of trade in a small way, railways being distant and carriage expensive, the sea became a simpler mode of conveyance for corn and coal, and removal of stone from the quarries behind Durl Head.

Many years before a man, less sleepy than his neighbours, had built a grey stone mill close to the grey stone bridge road that crossed the little river Durl at the head of the creek, and utilized the river running down to turn his wheel. Trade had grown, and the present owner was a busy man with good business coming and going, and a monopoly of coal and flour in his own hands for many miles round. The horses that drew his wagons were the best kept on the country-side, handsome teams whose bells could be heard on still days winding along the lonely roads over the bleak down as they hauled the heavy sacks of flour and coal away to far-off villages which possessed neither advantage of rail nor sea.

The miller was a man of all the importance that good investments and a large banking account can give. He had possessions, power, and influence, but he had not love ; certainly he did not seem to miss it, and contented himself with being well served, and, to a certain extent, feared.

He was a widower of some years standing, as his wife, a nervous invalid, had died of some internal complaint, leaving him without children. The village had pitied Mrs. Emmett during her dreary married life, and discussed her supposed feelings for her husband in many gossips ; no one could say that the miller ill-treated his wife, they would have liked to say so, of course, if there had been a shadow of reason. He took the same care of her as he did of his horses, and did all that was necessary to keep her in repair, as he did his mill ; but, in spite of that, she was a sad woman with a wistful, pinched face, and when she died Joshua Emmett, her husband, placed a handsome stone over her grave, and thought no more about her. He was busy making money, and such small matters as love, affection, kindness, and the happiness of his fellow-creatures seemed to him worth very little con-

sideration. He was the richest man for many miles round, though that was perhaps no great test, as the farmers who formed the residential population had a hard enough struggle to pay rent and make a living, as a rule, land being rather poor and markets low.

One very hot morning in July the miller sauntered down to the little rough quay that edged his mill-yard, and served as a landing-place for the goods. He had been away two or three days to the county town; he looked and felt prosperous (for worldly affairs were going well with him), and younger than his years, for he was a red man, with high colour and few lines in his face. His light-blue eyes were not set deeply, as is so often the case in south-coast faces, they were rather prominent, fair eye-lashes adding to the effect of their being very much on the surface, and very unshaded. He whistled to himself as he looked about, and very few things escaped his eye. That morning there was something new to observe, and the miller saw it at once. "Saunders," he called sharply, and a tall stout man appeared promptly at the door of the mill, covered with flour and looking hot and flustered.

"Yes, sir," he said, tentatively blinking at the sun glare, and wiping his face with a large coloured handkerchief.

The miller signed with his hand towards a barge that lay moored in mid-stream. She was a well-built boat, small of her kind, and neatly rigged. Jib, foresail, and sprit were spread to dry, and the main-sail neatly tied up under a canvas cover. All the sails were brown, and though patched in places, strong and sound, while the whole vessel carried the appearance of being well cared for. The miller took in her character at a glance, and also the presence of a small rowing-boat tied to the quay. Saunders, who was head man in the mill, followed his master's glance with an eye of disfavour.

"Eh?" said Mr. Emmett briskly.

"A new lot, sir," said the man, "came in with the tide yesterday sunrise; they've gone into old Tewkesbury's cottage."

The miller whistled in an interested manner, any question of property was pleasant to him. "Relations, I suppose," he said; then, after a thoughtful pause, "I didn't know old Tewkesbury had any relations. He was pretty close all his life, and double locked these last ten years. You know I offered him a good price for the reversion of his cottage."

"So I understood, sir," said Saunders, who was a bit of a gossip, and pleased to find his master in a communicative mood.

"He wouldn't sell though," went on Mr. Emmett. "I was a good bit annoyed, for I wanted the cottage, standing in the corner of Big Field as it does, I'd sooner have it in my own hands. However, it didn't much matter, as no doubt these people will be glad enough to sell it."

Saunders screwed up his lips, and said, "No doubt, sir," but his manner seemed to imply that there was a good deal behind if he choose to speak.

"What sort of people are they?" continued the miller, upon whom this suggestion of mystery was not lost. "What is their name? Is it a large family? What relation were they to the old man? I suppose he left them everything?"

"Well, sir," began Saunders, quite enjoying the unusual pleasure of being able to tell his master anything he did not know already. "The name, so far as I can make out, is Carne."

The miller raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, Cornish people," he suggested.

"That's about it, sir," went on Saunders, with strong disfavour. "Foreigners, that's what they are. I never so much as heard of the name myself. They

do say in the village that this Carne, Michael Carne his full name so I understand, is sister's son to old Tewkesbury. He quarrelled with all his own people years ago, but there was one sister he held to, she married a man down Cornwall way, and *this* man's her son. D'you see, sir?"

The miller nodded.

"Is this Carne a young man? I suppose not, though, old Tewkesbury was getting well into his eighty when he died."

"As to his age, sir," answered Saunders cautiously, for he was a very accurate man, with narrow views and strong prejudices, three reasons why the miller had kept him so long; "as to age, sir, I'd say he might be in his forty-five, or again he might be a bit older. You see this Mrs. Carne might have been a deal younger than the old man, like enough she was, as they do say in the village he was one of a long family."

"Is he a married man?" asked the miller, lighting his pipe.

"He was, sir. At least so they seem to think down the village, there being a young woman with him who appears to be his daughter, but seemingly his wife's dead. Anyway, there are only these two, and alike as two peas, you couldn't mistake 'em or ought else but father and daughter."

"Oh," said the miller, "I'm glad there's not a long family. I hate a lot of children racketing about the fields and breaking the hedges, that was one advantage of old Tewkesbury. However, it won't matter much what these people are, I shall buy the cottage, and pull it down, it is all to pieces now."

Saunders listened with interest. His master did not often state his intentions openly.

"The boat looks well built, and well kept," he went on critically; "what's her name?"

"A silly name to my thinking," answered the man again with strong disfavour. "They call her *The Brown Bird*."

"Ah," said the miller, "because of her brown sails, I suppose, and probably she's a good one to go too. I don't see any harm in the name."

Saunders was silent. After a moment's pause, in which the miller smoked thoughtfully, he said, "They brought their bit of furniture round in her, and were carrying it up to the cottage all yesterday; old-fashioned sticks, nothing to look at." The miller smiled a little with his eyes half closed, and the foreman continued, growing a little bolder, "*Ellen and Sarah's* expected in to-morrow with the corn from Salterne. I don't know what William Mew will say to this yer *Brown Bird*, as they call her, filling up the channel. And end of the week Reuben Kentfield's bringing up the coal from Rockhampton; he won't be best pleased to find another boat cutting in to take his trade away; he was only telling me the other day there was just about enough doing for the three: *Ellen and Sarah, The Three Sisters*, and Haynes' boat."

"Ah," said the miller, ignoring his man's confidences, "where is the *Queen of England*?"

"Down at the mouth," answered Saunders rather sulkily. "Haynes has got her up on the low shore, scraping of her."

"Will she be ready to take the flour to Rockhampton to-morrow?" asked the miller. "They want it very particularly."

Saunders looked disturbed. "I don't know as they will, sir; young Haynes told me the 'jestys' hadn't come for her bottom; he was pretty well put out about it, they're expecting it by the carrier to-morrow evening."

"Well, I can't wait," said the miller dryly, "I promised the Rockhampton people I wouldn't fail

them about the flour. The new boat will have to take it, that's all, she looks smart enough."

And he turned away and sauntered towards his well-kept square stone house, leaving Saunders staring after him with every feeling against the newcomers intensified.

At dinner-time the miller's man told his wife about the conversation, and received hearty sympathy in his annoyance.

"Fancy the master behaving so," exclaimed Mrs. Saunders, who was a small, thin, active woman with a long tongue.

"The master don't care, so long as the flour's paid for," said her husband.

"That's where it is, of course, but to my mind it's only penny wise and pound foolish letting in a lot of foreigners; what do we want having the trade spoilt and the bread taken out of our mouths by strangers." Mrs. Saunders was speaking very figuratively, be it observed, because she and her husband were well-off people, with a good pile of savings and not likely to lose bread by anybody.

"What's the good of talking," said Saunders disconsolately. "If the master had objected to them he could have kept them out of it pretty well. But he'll never do that, so long's the boat's a good fast boat and up to time and tide. I've no patience with him. What do we want with new people?"

"Well, I wouldn't worry overmuch if I were you," said his wife soothingly, "eat your dinner, and don't put yourself about. There's more ways than one of killing a cat. I, for one, don't believe these Carnes, or whatever they call themselves, will stay long in Durlmouth."

Her husband looked at her inquiringly.

"Why do you say that? Has anybody told you about the master buying Tewkesbury's cottage?" he

asked, rather jealous lest any one should know more than he. His wife's interest set his mind at rest on that point; she listened eagerly while he repeated the miller's remarks.

"There you are," she said triumphantly; "didn't I tell you there was more ways than one of killing a cat than drowning of her? Don't you trouble about these foreigners, they'll soon be out of the place. Everybody's against them. I've been all round this afternoon. There's no one as doesn't mean to give 'em the go by—at least, hardly any one. Emma Fearey shut me up. 'What harm have they done you?' she says. '*Harm*,' I said, 'harm enough, coming poking their noses into Durlmouth village, taking bread out of people's mouths as have lived here since they were born.' 'Oh, *you* won't starve,' she says, sharp as needles, 'I suppose they've as good a right to live as anybody else'; and with that she slammed her door in my face, and that dog barked at me as impudent as a human."

"Emma Fearey always has that way, standing up for people she knows nothing about," said Saunders resentfully. "I always have said, and I'll always say it again, that when people are foreigners you may be pretty sure there's something against them; else why don't they stay among their own kinfolk?" He leaned back in his chair and looked triumphantly at his wife.

"You never spoke a truer word in your life, Saunders," said she; at this moment there was a knock at the door.

Mrs. Saunders went to open it, and discovered a small boy who did odd jobs in the miller's stable and garden.

"What do you want, my lad?" she inquired, wiping her arms on her apron, for her hands had been in the washing-up bowl.

"Please, 'm, the master says will Mr. Saunders go up to Tewkesbury's cottage as soon as he can after dinner and find out if they'll take the flour to Rockhampton to-morrow tide. The master says be sure and find out, as he means to get it away."

The boy ran off, hardly waiting for the murmured assent, Mrs. Saunders shut the door and sat down on the edge of a chair.

"I call it too bad," she exclaimed, staring at her husband.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW-COMERS HAVE TWO VISITORS

BUT in spite of the resentment of the miller's man, the miller's orders had to be obeyed, and quickly too. Saunders knew this very well, and therefore a few minutes only elapsed before he started on his mission, leaving his wife standing at the open door talking indignantly to her next-door neighbour over the low fuchsia hedge that divided the two little paths of uneven flag-stone.

"I really don't know what my husband will say," said Mrs. Kentfield, who was a tall heavy woman of slow comprehension, and not ill-natured unless her own interests were assailed, "I really do not know. It's bad enough already to get an honest living for a long family like ours, even when Kentfield's in full work, and if he's got to stand back out of his turn to let this new boat come in, I really don't know what he *will* say."

Mrs. Saunders was full of ready sympathy, and both the women discussed the new-comers without taking

into consideration either justice or charity, so that they succeeded very quickly in making themselves more angry than when they began talking, a very usual result of such conversation.

Meanwhile Saunders proceeded heavily up the sunny road that led away from the creek along the dip that lay between the up sweep of the downs inland, and the steep rough slope that led up to the cliff-top seawards. There was no regular village "street." The cottages faced all ways, seldom more than two together, and had the appearance of settling in corners that they expected would be out of the wind. The ground on either side of the road was so irregular that some were six or eight feet above the common level, while some again nestled in hollows. The soil was very rocky; everywhere rough steps led up or down to little gates in the boundary hedges of fuchsia and myrtle, while the gardens bloomed where they could—some of them mere potato-patches on the steep slope, while others were cultivated in old cuttings that looked liked dis-used quarries, and profited so well by the shelter and sunshine that they blazed with colours of old-fashioned flowers, as well as vegetables.

Old Tewkesbury's cottage stood alone, some little distance along the road. It stood at a corner just where the road turned sharply inland round the end of the long slope of down that Mr. Emmett had called the "big field," and it was built right against the steep slope; a little uneven building with a thatched roof, in which were two little windows looking like heavy eyes, squeezed against, almost into, the great wave of hillside that swept up skywards immediately behind it. The garden, which had been its late owner's one joy and employment, was productive and pretty, the scarlet runners making a brave patch of colour against the hillside, and the yellow "marrows" peeping out of their rough dark-green backgrounds in their bed cut out of

the slope. The miller's man did not admire the beauty of the scene. He looked at the roses and jessamine climbing over the untidy thatch, and the small uneven windows peeping out through the little vine nailed carefully up the house-front.

"The master'll make a clean sweep of the whole thing," he thought to himself sourly, finding great comfort in the thought too. "Dig it in, and plant a potato-patch at this corner, that's what he'll do, and a good thing too," then with some curiosity mingled with his ill-feeling he opened the small rickety gate, and tramped up the flagged path between the little box borders with the scent of many flowers heavy in his nostrils.

The door stood open, the front-room was tidy in spite of the recent in-coming, and the sound of a singing voice came from the wash-house at the back. The voice was young, fresh and happy, but the song did not appeal to the miller's man, who only wondered if his knock would be heard as he rapped a second time on the open door.

The song ceased, and was succeeded by sounds as though plates were being put away and water pumped for washing. Then the further door opened and a tall girl came out, and crossed the front-room with an easy step and stood before him.

Saunders looked at her, and a slight sense of shyness overcame him for a moment; or rather hardly shyness, it was more a feeling of discomfort, for the girl looked at him with such a sincere and friendly expression that uneasiness kept him silent for a moment.

"Do you want to speak to father?" she said, and Saunders perceived a slight accent in her speech that was strange to him. "He went out after dinner, and I don't rightly know where he is this moment."

"I'd a message for him from the master," said Saunders, finding his tongue.

"Sit you down a minute, mister, while I go and look where he's got to," said the girl, advancing a chair and smiling.

The miller's man did not smile in reply ; he was recovering from his surprise, and resuming his old armour of antagonism.

"I can't wait," he answered ungraciously, avoiding the direct glance of the beautiful dark eyes, "you can tell him, I suppose? The miller, Mr. Emmett, wants to know if he can take a load of sacks of ground flour round to Rockhampton to-morrow tide."

"Oh yes, and glad, I expect," said the girl, without showing she noticed her visitor's ungracious manner. "We're pretty straight now," and she looked round the little room.

"Oh well, that's all then," and the miller's man turned away and walked off down the little path without even a good-morning.

Esther Carne stood still at the door looking after him, for a minute her black eyebrows drew together, and a shadow of anger passed like a cloud across her face, then it cleared, and she laughed a little. "*If that's* the manners of the country-side, I can't say much for them," she said. Then she stood looking out at the garden and the sunny road, singing, or rather humming softly to herself with a sense of peace and contentment in the silent beauty of the downs and waste of bracken-covered cliff.

Esther was a woman of quick changes, the Celtic blood in her veins moved her sometimes to deep melancholy, and sometimes to the joyous gaiety of a child. Tender-hearted and lovable, she was capable of fierce anger when roused to indignation. Her dark-brown eyes, almost black in the shadow of heavy lashes, would be soft and almost pathetic one moment, half closed and full of dreaming fancies that made all the lines of her face fall into sadness, and within a minute

perhaps they would be wide open, flashing sparks, it almost seemed, and full of many-coloured brightness and compelling force. Her hair seemed to match them well, being of deepest dusky brown, in which appeared at times shades of red and bronze; it was curly rough hair, showing great strength of constitution in its owner, and of great length and thickness. Everything about Esther Carne seemed to denote strength of mind and body. Her height and freedom of movement, her quick strong hands and small muscular wrists, her clear pale skin, tanned but not burned, and perhaps most of all her strong white teeth, which she showed more than people ordinarily do, as hers was a very mobile mouth, seldom set, constantly varying with her moods, and full of expression and character.

"What does it matter," said Esther half aloud; she had a habit of speaking to herself, being often alone. "What does it matter if people are grumpy, I don't suppose Durlmouth manners are on *his* pattern." She laughed again, then her face changed again and she waved her hand vigorously towards a figure coming slowly into view, and hastened down the flag path to the little gate.

"Father," she called excitedly, as the figure drew near, "did you meet him?"

Michael Carne nodded. Esther laughed, and went on gaily as she held back the little gate for her father's entrance.

"He was a queer sort of man, hadn't a word to say, just, 'Would you take some flour round to Rockhampton for the miller,' and before I could speak almost 'all right,' and off he went, looking at me as though—well, I don't know, quite *savage*."

Her father let her talk as they walked slowly up the path. There was an expression of gloom and worry on his face, evidently habitual, but intensified by

some recent annoyance. He was an embittered likeness of Esther. The same eyes but shadowed with gloom, the same colouring without the brilliant changes, the same mouth but settled in lines of hardness. He was thin, and grey beyond his years, but evidently a powerful man of good constitution and temperate life. Esther noticed the silence quickly, as she noticed everything.

"What did he say to you, then?" she asked.

"The same," answered Carne, standing a moment at the low doorway to look round, as Esther had done, at the peaceful beauty of the scene.

"And what did you say?" pursued Esther, who was not afraid of her father's depressing manner, and accustomed as a rule to take his pessimistic view of things lightly.

Carne did not reply to her questioning at once, he appeared to be considering.

"And what did you say?" persisted Esther, passing her arm through his coaxingly. "You'll go, father; you'll take *Brown Bird* to Rockhampton, won't you, and show 'em all how a boat can sail. I looked at the other boats about; they don't seem up to much."

"The two barges that do most of Mr. Emmett's work are out," said Carne, "I dare say they're better boats than ours."

"Don't believe it," said Esther decisively. For the first time a smile stole round her father's lips and shone in his sad eyes.

Esther's belief in the beauty of *Brown Bird* was an old joke between them.

"There's a barge up on the beach near the entrance," went on the girl, "she's called *Queen of England*, some men were scraping her. They stared at me when I went to look."

Carne nodded. "That's where it is, she can't be

ready, and the others are out, so I've got the job, they wouldn't have given it to me unless."

Esther raised her eyebrows with a little amused glance at her father.

"Oh, come now, dad, we've come here to live and to work, 'tisn't much use looking at things in a down-hearted way."

"To live," echoed Carne dryly, ignoring the last part of her remark, "if they'll let us."

"Let us!" exclaimed Esther, "why not? What's in your mind, dad? Why shouldn't they let us live, we haven't done them any harm?"

"Some people don't wait for that before they let fly at a fellow-creature," said Carne bitterly. "Done! that's about it, what have we done? but these folk down here are all set against us."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Esther rather sharply; "now don't you begin with fancies, dad. That's the worst of you, always crossing the bridge before we get to it! What is the use of making up your mind that Durlmouth folk want to be our enemies. People mostly find what they look for; and if you go about expecting unfriendly ways you'll like enough meet them. We've only been in the place two days, nobody has interfered with us, it's a lovely place to live in, and we've nothing to regret, and everything to be glad about; now *do* cheer up and look to the bright side; we've left all the hard life and hard days behind us; we've got a little home of our own, with the prettiest garden in the world, and for all we know, plenty of kind neighbours. What is the use of looking for trouble? I wish you wouldn't, father."

"It comes quick enough without looking for it, my girl," said Carne. "But there; let's say no more. You'll find out fast enough what I mean."

Esther put her hand over his mouth, and having effectually stopped further speech, walked him off

round the garden at the back, where the slope climbed from the very wall of the cottage, and little plots were cut out of its side, and planted carefully with all sorts of flowers and vegetables.

"Old Uncle Tewkesbury made the most of his garden, dad, didn't he. Look at the little rockery at the back where the wall of the cliff comes round the potato-bed; why, he made the most of everything."

"Nothing else to do, I suppose," said her father. But he looked with pleasure at the luxuriant growth of sweet-peas and climbing nasturtium, the laden gooseberry and currant bushes, and all the evidences of care and toil in his little domain.

"Isn't it beautiful, dad," said Esther happily. "We ought to have no sorrows here. We've got everything we want."

"It looks fair enough, my girl," said Carne. "Pretty enough and easy enough on the outside; but you never know, and as far as I can see there'll be enough trouble——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Esther; her tone was a laughing one, but her eyes were sad. "Oh, please don't, dad; now let's go in and have tea, and I want to ask you about something very particular."

Esther's "something" was neither more nor less than a request that her father should buy some pieces of wall-paper at Rockhampton, and paper the front-room and two little bedrooms for her.

Carne shook his head doubtfully.

"Oh, but, dad, it won't cost much," said the girl eagerly. "A pail of whitewash for the ceilings and the kitchen, and you can get ever such a pretty paper for a shilling the piece, or less, and see how small the rooms are. I've set my heart on having it all pretty inside; look at it now, Uncle Tewkesbury never touched it all the years he lived here; we *must* do it."

"I don't know where the money's to come from,"

said her father doubtfully. "I'd like to please you, my girl, but you know coming up has cost us pretty near every penny; there was little enough after clearing up at home. I owe the lawyer something, worse luck; and Uncle Tewkesbury left us no money, you know, nothing but the house and garden and what was in them."

"I wish he'd left us a little money," said Esther rather sadly, "a very little, just enough to put things straight;" then, remembering that she was breaking her rules for looking at things cheerfully, she stopped herself quickly. "Seems I'm talking nonsense," she went on laughingly, after a moment's pause, "'much wants more,' the proverb says; it's curious how easily one gets into the way of wanting a little more than you've got, whatever it is. Well, I won't say anything about it, father, if we can't do it we can't; let's be thankful we've got the pretty cottage and garden and health to enjoy them."

Carne sighed. The lines of his face settling into the habitual gloom that rested like a cloud on his soul.

"Seems hard I'm never allowed to give you what you most want, my girl," he said, after a pause, "and you the only thing I've cared for since your poor mother was taken. But that's always so with me; the black luck that's followed me all through."

Esther put her fingers in her ears.

"Ah, you may shut out the hearing of it all," said Carne, with increased bitterness, "but it won't take away the truth. There are some people who would be all the better for a little good fortune; they'd grow like flowers in sunshine, but they never get it—never get a bit of rest from worry and strain; never get a week's peace; never get exactly what they most want, if they do get something approaching to it, why something else comes in and ruins the pleasure of it. I've *heard* a good deal time and again of the

goodness and mercies of God, but I can't say I've ever seen much of it."

"Well," exclaimed a sharp voice, suddenly interrupting, "I don't wish to be rude and go beyond what's neighbourly, but I can't stand here and not speak. That sort of talk is all nonsense."

Michael Carne and his daughter had not noticed the entrance, or rather the advent, of a third person, for they were talking earnestly. They both started and looked round hastily, to discover a very small woman standing in the doorway, regarding them with indignation. She was an odd-looking woman too. Of any age between fifty and sixty, with sharp dried-up features, bright black eyes, and nearly white hair, which was drawn to the top of her head in a very small knot and covered with a dilapidated felt man's hat, of the kind commonly called a "billy-cock." The rest of her dress was neat though shabby, and covered with a big apron. Sitting by her side on the doorstep was an old black-and-white sheep-dog, with one eye and a tuft for a tail, toothless, and stiff of limb. This curious pair returned the gaze of Esther and her father, unconcerned.

"By the look of you," she went on cheerfully, "I've lived longer in the world than either, and so I may be allowed to speak. There'll be no good come of doubting the Almighty, and Trixie here knows it as well as I do. When you think He's forgotten you is perhaps the very time He's set on you most. I've had some prettysore times myself, seeing I'm a coast-guard's daughter, and a pilot's widow, both of them drowned off the Durl Head. I've never had a child but Trixie here; and most of them belonging to me are at the bottom of the sea; but I never found it eased me to blame the Almighty; He's not to say always understandable, but that's no fault of His, seeing the best of us haven't much wits to boast of, as

any one can see by the silly mistakes we make whenever we take to trusting in our own judgment."

Here she paused for breath, as she had been speaking rapidly, and caught Esther's eyes watching her full of laughter.

"Won't you come in and sit down?" said the girl.

"Well, my dear, I'll not refuse," answered the little woman cheerfully, taking the nearest chair by the door and looking curiously round the room, as she sat with her small hands clasped on her knees. "As I was saying, Trixie's not young, and I'm not young; and rest for old bones never comes amiss. Well, and what do you think of Durlmouth?"

"Oh, we think it is a very pretty place," said Esther, with enthusiasm. "You see, down Cornwall way it's more bleak than it is here—at least where we came from it is. This creek's so pretty and sheltered; you seem to be out of the way of the wind too."

"Out of the way of the north wind," put in her father quietly. He had been regarding the visitor with a thoughtful air, and now lighted his pipe as he spoke.

The little woman looked at him with her bright eyes.

"Well," she said, "north and east we make little account of here; even the west we don't feel till we get outside. The south wind stirs us up above a bit; but there, south wind is mostly soft as silk, so we've a lot to be thankful for in that, eh, Mr. Carne?"

Michael Carne nodded without reply. Esther said amicably, with a sense of warding off discussion—

"What a nice dog you've got, Mrs. ——" she hesitated.

"Mrs. Fearey," said the little woman, supplying the name with brisk decision. "Emma Fearey, widow of George Fearey, pilot, *and* daughter of

Stephen Weld, as old a Durlmouth name as you'll find. By the same token there are few enough of the Weld family left now. Stephen Weld, my eldest brother's only son, is the last of the name down here. Sailors, coastguards, and pilots they've been for many generations, and the sea's had most of them. I'm a lonely old woman, my dear, but not an unthankful one."

Esther got up from her chair and came forward to stroke the dog with a certain shy desire to show sympathy.

"Isn't he blind?" she asked, as the dog raised his grey old face. "Poor old dog."

"He's blind of *one* eye," remarked his mistress cheerfully, "you can't expect all your faculties when you get on in life; but there, bless you, he sees so much with the other, that it don't make no manner of difference. You'd have to be pretty sharp to escape Trixie's eye; wouldn't they, my pretty?"

The old dog agitated his stump of a tail, and looking into his mistress' face gave a short sharp bark.

"There," said Mrs. Fearey proudly, "you hear him. He'll talk to you by the hour, as wise as a human creature."

"He's lost his teeth," exclaimed Esther pityingly.

"Well, my dear, he can do well enough without them. I haven't got any to boast of myself, but it's easy enough to manage without. Never a bit of dinner does my Trixie get that isn't ready cooked and minced. I was seventeen years cook in high families before I ever married Fearey, and I can always manage so that Trixie shall have a meal that will be no trouble to him, teeth or no teeth."

"Trixie is a lucky person to have such a kind mistress," said Esther warmly.

Mrs. Fearey's sharp face softened, and the old dog

laid his chin on her knee, returning her look with absorbed devotion.

"Oh, my dear," she said, laying her hand on the grizzled head. "It's wonderful how a bit of love and kindness smooths the rough paths for us poor human creatures. The Bible says so, and the Bible can't go wrong; so just you keep to the words you find there while you're young, and then when you're as old as me and Trixie you won't feel bitter, even if all you love have gone on before. Love and kindness is like sunshine, always does some one good."

"There doesn't seem much love and kindness towards new-comers in Durlmouth folk," said Carne dryly, as he rose and came to the door to knock the ashes out of his pipe.

"Ah," said Mrs. Fearey, and there was inquiry in the exclamation.

"Father thinks people are not inclined to be friendly to us, Mrs. Fearey," explained Esther reddening, "but I tell him it's all fancy, they don't know us yet."

The pilot's widow screwed up her mouth reflectively. There was a pause. Then she said—

"And supposing everybody wasn't friendly to begin with; well, it won't hurt you, Mr. Carne, or your daughter. We must take things as we find them in this world, the rough with the smooth. Laugh and take no notice. Not that I'm saying for a moment people are not feeling friendly towards you; but it's a terrible pity to be on the look-out for slights."

"I'm not on the look-out for slights," said Carne doggedly, "but I'm not one to go running after people. Neither me nor my daughter mean to be unfriendly; but I'm too proud a man to make up to those who don't want me."

Mrs. Fearey rose from her chair.

"Well," she said cheerfully, "idle gossip won't



"And as to *pride*," said Mrs. Fearey.

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hoe up potatoes, and Trixie can't abear to see his mother lazy, especially near supper-time, so I'll say good-night to you, Mr. Carne."

"Good-night, ma'am," said Michael Carne, smiling down at the little upright figure. "It was very kind of you to come in and see us; we shall always be glad of a visit."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Fearey briskly; thinking what a pity it was that this dark sad-faced man did not smile more often. "I hope your daughter will come and see me; a bit farther up the road, standing back on the cliff-side, she can't miss it. Two cottages together, and the one with the best garden is mine." She laughed and walked off down the path, the old dog keeping up with her stiffly, by reason of rheumatism and age. Esther and her father stood in the doorway watching the brisk little figure with its strange head-gear, and were just about to make a remark to each other, when Mrs. Fearey turned and came back with a quick step, Trixie keeping pace with difficulty.

"And as to *pride*," said Mrs. Fearey, suddenly stopping in front of Carne and looking up at him with her head on one side, "as to pride, Mr. Carne, you'll find it's poor comfort to live and die upon. It's little enough we poor human creatures can find to be proud over, look where we will." Then, before Esther or her father could reply she trotted off again, chattering all the time to Trixie, and disappeared through the gate.

CHAPTER III

THE MESHES OF THE NET



AT the fall of dusk the day following, just when the high tide was at the turn, *Brown Bird* went out with her cargo of ground corn.

The miller had been "set," as his man said, on getting the flour away, and had put on all hands to load, and he stood on the quay, well pleased to have accomplished his object, watching the warm brown sails skim sleepily away down the creek; appearing and disappearing as the *Brown Bird* rounded the curves of the inlet on her outward course.

Outside the strong tide was running westward, having turned some three hours before; but it was not possible to take advantage of that, because a heavily-laden barge had to wait up at the quay till there was water enough to make her departure safe. Inside the fitful summer breeze made the use of the long sweeps necessary for punting out; but once out of the rock-bound shelter a steady easterly breeze in the channel gave every promise of a quick voyage.

"A very good piece of work," said Mr. Emmett, rubbing his hands. "This fellow Carne is a smart man, he knows how to handle a boat, and he doesn't talk. You fellows are asleep half your time," and he walked away, leaving sullen looks and resentment behind him among those who could not deny that there was some truth in his strictures.

Durhammouth workers liked to take their time. The miller was a man of restless energy; hitherto they had held matters a good deal in their own hands, but here was an interloper, who had shown an energy and

briskness that surpassed all their ideas of what was reasonable, and actually satisfied the miller.

Mr. Emmett paused as a sudden thought struck him.

"Wasn't there some one else on board besides Carne and young Occomore?" he inquired of Saunders, who was turning into the mill with lagging feet.

"Yes, sir, the girl," answered Saunders, divided between relief that his master was satisfied, and annoyance that the work was better done than usual.

"The daughter, oh," said Mr. Emmett; "what does she go for, doesn't she like to be left alone?" and he laughed at his own little joke, being in a good humour with all the world. "I thought she was big enough to take care of herself."

The miller's man laughed rather sourly.

"You may well say 'big enough,' sir, as my missus said to me yesterday, she might as well be a grown man for size. Oh, *she* doesn't want to be taken care of;" this was spoken with scorn, as though it was in some way a slur upon Esther's character; "she does a man's work, so they say, and goes with Carne to save a hand."

"Wise man," said the miller; "if he pays fewer hands he puts the more into his own pocket;" and walked away, leaving Saunders struggling with his smouldering indignation at the persistent refusal of his master to see anything objectionable in the newcomers.

Some two or three hours later the *Ellen and Sarah* came in with her load of corn from Salterne, and was greeted by information that turned her owners into a little knot of grumblers, who met with far more sympathy than the occasion required.

Meanwhile the *Brown Bird* with her load was cutting the dark water at a fine pace, with the moon rising, a fair wind, and on the rush of the strong out-

going tide. Esther sat on the deck and sang to herself as she steered on a point fixed by her father, while he brought the deck to that state of precision which he and Esther considered correct. *Brown Bird* never presented the untidy appearance of some coasting barges; what hands could do, was done; clean decks, neatly-coiled ropes, and polished brass, where brass appeared, made her superior to her companions, and a continual joy and pride to her owners. Esther was accustomed to voyages in all weathers, and under all conditions, she had grown up on the sea and understood winds and tides; it was true that she more than saved her father a hand, because her intelligence was greatly superior to that of the ordinary barge hand, and her enthusiasm even greater than her strength, though that was considerable.

The young hand they had taken with them was a strong lad of sixteen, grandson of old Occomore, the cleverest pilot for many miles east and west. He lived in Durlmouth, and belonged to a Salterne boat, and young Occomore lived with him, the last of the family, working on the barges, and hoping some day to be as well known a pilot as his grandfather, when he should have passed the necessary examinations. The village prejudice against the Carnes had hardly affected him, while his admiration for Esther's boat knowledge and the beauty of the new barge had made him a welcome volunteer for service on board.

When Michael Carne had cleared the gear to his satisfaction, and made the boat ship-shape, he came and sat down near his daughter, watching the course she was steering with an eye of approval.

"We are making a splendid run of it, father," said Esther joyfully.

"Yes, if the wind holds; but we've got to reckon with the flowing tide before long," said Carne, as he

lighted his pipe and sheltered the bowl from the wind.

"We shall get round the Black Rock with this tide," answered the girl confidently, "and after that it won't so much matter, besides the wind will hold."

Carne looked at the sky, the travelling moon, and the steady hull of the barge as she swept on her course, ploughing through the long roll of the black sea, and throwing a line of silver from her sharp bows as the phosphorous glittered in the foam she scattered.

There was silence as both father and daughter enjoyed the peace and beauty of the scene. Presently Carne said, thoughtfully—

"I've been thinking a good bit about what you asked me ; about the house, I mean."

"Oh don't, dad," exclaimed Esther anxiously, "what can it matter ? Don't you think about it again, it was silly of me to trouble you. The house will do nicely ; why I haven't half cleaned it yet."

"Oh, I know, I know, my girl. You're as good as gold," said her father affectionately. "But I'd like to see it nice, just as well as you would ; and it isn't only the paper. Something must be done to the roof, the water comes through. The doors want a bit of paint, and the pump's broken. Now I've been thinking as I'm going to the lawyer at Rockhampton, whether I couldn't get him to lend me a bit of money on the house. Say it's worth a hundred pounds ; I dare say with the land it might be a little more. Now supposing I get him to let me have twenty pounds on it ; we could pay it off monthly without any difficulty as long as I got good work."

There was a pause ; then Esther, whose strong common-sense saw trouble ahead in this idea, said with hesitation—

"But hadn't we better perhaps wait for a year and save up the money to do the repairs?"

"How can we wait a year when the ceilings may fall in with the damp?" said Carne irritably. It was characteristic of the man that, in spite of his habitually gloomy view of life, he would often insist obstinately on an unwise course, and then, if it proved a failure, rail against the ill-luck that dogged his life.

Esther was torn between her desire to have the work done, which would give her all she wished, and her fears of the hitherto unknown weight of a mortgage.

"There would be interest, father," she said nervously.

"Yes, but that isn't much on twenty pounds," replied Carne. "Say ten per cent.; they couldn't ask you more than that. Well, that's not much, and supposing we paid off one pound a month of the principal, why we should soon get rid of it."

Esther said nothing.

"Perhaps I could get less, half even," said her father, seeing her want of enthusiasm.

"I shouldn't mind that," said the girl eagerly, "I believe we could get it all done for ten pounds, and that really wouldn't be much. I believe I could make that in a year with bees, father, if you'll get me two hives, and let me start keeping them."

"Ah, well then, we'll find out what we can do when we get to Rockhampton," said Carne, pleased with his scheme; "we can bring the hives back, in any case; that's a good idea of yours, the bees ought to do well in the corner under the cliff behind the house."

There the conversation ended for the time, for the steering was becoming a matter that required undivided attention, as the towering heights of the Black Rock Bill loomed out of the shadows, and the pitching of *Brown Bird* gave evidence that she

already felt the strength of the Black Rock race under her keel.

Michael Carne did not take his daughter with him to the lawyers' offices in the High Street. She waited on board to superintend the unloading of the flour, capable as a man of business and energy. The large firm supplied by the miller of Durlmouth sent down vans and men, and Esther looked after the details with coolness and precision.

Messrs. Norman and Platt were an old-established firm of county solicitors, and had been entrusted by old Uncle Tewkesbury with the drawing up of his will, because they were the only lawyers he had ever heard of practically, and also, perhaps, because knowing they were wealthy, and in a large way of business, he was less suspicious of their intentions than he would have been of men who had their way to make.

They could not see their client at first, but an appointment was made, and later in the day Michael returned to the offices, and was shown up-stairs into a long old-fashioned room, with a window at the end looking over a sunny old-fashioned garden.

There were no outward signs of wealth. Newer firms had far better furnished offices. An old Turkey carpet, faded beyond recognition of its colouring; several heavy windsor chairs with arms; two worn heavy writing-tables down the centre of the room, furnished with pedestals of drawers, and littered recklessly with papers and dusty books; and, for the rest, shelves. Shelves everywhere, holding tin boxes with painted letters on them; more dusty books; packets and packets of dusty papers docketed, strapped up, piled together. Michael Carne looked round with interest. He had been here once before, but was almost too excited then, at learning of the little windfall come to him, to notice detail; to-day

he looked more curiously, his thoughtful mind and intelligent eyes taking in all the surroundings.

Mr. Norman entered, rubbing his hands, and apologized for the absence of his partner. He was a middle-aged man with a pale, deeply-lined face, and a slight nervous jerk of the head; his eyes were prominent, and he had a tendency to hesitation in speaking, hardly a stammer, but a stop and rapid continuance, almost like a little pounce. He had not forgotten his humble client, the owner of the ketch *Brown Bird*, and treated him with as studied a courtesy as he would employ in conducting business with the Duke of Rockhampton or Sir Peter Weld, the great landowners of the county.

Michael stated his wish simply. A little loan on the place to carry out repairs; he was in good work,—the miller, Mr. Emmett, was willing to give him as much carrying as he could do.

"Ah," said Mr. Norman, but he said no word to suggest that Mr. Joshua Emmett was one of his wealthiest clients.

Michael urged that he could pay back the principal and interest easily in a year, as he and his daughter were accustomed to careful living.

Mr. Norman smiled courteously, and suggested that the point in question really was, whether the little property would bear any burden.

Michael winced and flushed. He disliked the sound of the expression. He had not allowed himself to remember that a debt on the house practically meant a distant danger of losing the house; so he remained silent, while Mr. Norman looked through papers.

Presently the lawyer looked up and asked when he would require the money. Michael said he had really wanted it immediately, in fact, to take back with him; he would be in Rockhampton three days, certainly, and might remain longer.

Mr. Norman considered, jerking his head at intervals, then he told Michael that he would let him have a definite answer next morning, if he would return at eleven o'clock, and the master of *Brown Bird* departed to tell his daughter of the interview and expectations.

As soon as he was gone the lawyer sent for one of the clerks that sat writing all day in the lower office, and gave him instructions for a letter to Mr. Joshua Emmett, miller, of Durlmouth, to be sent out by an early post.

"I think," said Mr. Norman to himself, as the clerk carried away the signed letter later, "that this is just what Emmett has been waiting for; I fancy he will close with this at once."

But even Mr. Norman was surprised when the first morning train, the early market train, brought the miller himself in answer to the proposal.

"I thought I could explain better personally," said Mr. Emmett. "The fact is, I wanted to buy that bit out, you know."

The lawyer nodded, adding that was why he had suggested the idea of taking up the mortgage.

"This will do just as well," said the miller; "I'll advance the money under *three* conditions."

Mr. Norman listened, and jotted down instructions; for twenty minutes they talked, and then the miller departed, prosperous, well dressed, and satisfied; and the lawyer waited for Michael Carne, who arrived at eleven punctually, a little anxious, and with Esther's injunctions to be careful ringing in his ears.

"I hope you will be satisfied, Mr. Carne," said Mr. Norman, setting his finger-tips together and smiling pleasantly. "We have communicated with our client, who is willing to invest on your security to the extent of £50 for one year."

"But we don't want £50," exclaimed Michael

hastily, "£50 is too much by a long way, I'd rather have £10, or £20 at the outside."

"Well, that is where the difficulty lies," replied Mr. Norman suavely. "It is not an easy thing to get an advance of such small sums. Don't you think you had better accept this offer? You may not get another."

Michael was silent. Presently he said uneasily, "How can I pay back £50?"

"But, my dear Mr. Carne, you need not spend it, you see," said Mr. Norman, "our client only asks five per cent. interest. Now, if you go to some small money-lender you will possibly get your £10; but you may have to pay forty or fifty per cent. Perhaps you know what those sort of people are? Now, our client is a most respectable man, but he does not care to invest less than £50, or for longer than one year; my advice to you is, take the money, which we are empowered to hand over to you at once; you can keep it and return it with the interest; you see, you will be paying no more for it than for a less sum in the other case—and, you are in safe hands."

Michael Carne looked on the ground and drummed on the arms of his chair. He wished he had Esther to consult with. Presently he said—

"I think I won't decide to-day."

Mr. Norman shrugged his shoulders a little.

"I am afraid, Mr. Carne, we shall not be able to keep the matter open. Our instructions were very definite—that the sum was to be not less than £50, for not longer than one year, and that you were to decide 'yes' or 'no' on the spot. We are very sorry to hurry you, but I am afraid you must take it or leave it."

There was another pause. Then the Cornishman said, fixing his wistful dark eyes on the lawyer—

"You think I should be all right in doing this, sir?"

"I can assure you that our client is a most respected and safe man," answered the lawyer.

"He wouldn't be likely to come down on me, you think?" continued the master of the *Brown Bird* anxiously.

"Certainly not before the termination of the year, and, even then, I can hardly imagine such a contingency probable," and Mr. Norman jerked his head and fidgeted among the papers on his desk as though the interview was exceeding the limits he had prescribed.

"I owe you something, I know," said Michael, after another minute of silence, "that ought to be paid; it was not much, though, because I paid the most part."

"Don't let that trouble you, Mr. Carne," said the lawyer pleasantly. "There is some small matter I believe still owing, but nothing of importance."

Michael Carne ran through the position in his mind. Unless he took this money he would be hardly likely to get any. It was true that he need not spend the money even though he had it; it could be locked up and returned quarterly with the interest. As he considered the idea looked feasible, the gloom and anxiety on his dark face lightened.

"After all, I needn't spend it," he said aloud, repeating his thoughts.

Mr. Norman assented.

"Then I think I'll—I'd better decide to—to have it," said Michael.

And Mr. Norman assented again.

CHAPTER IV

ESTHER FINDS FRIENDS



It was some time before Michael Carne could persuade his daughter to see the transaction in the same light in which he had brought himself to regard it.

Esther was dismayed. Even £20 would have appeared to her a serious burden, but £50! In vain did the master of the *Brown Bird* argue that it really made no difference, they would use the £10, not a penny more, and return the rest quarterly with the interest.

"We shan't even have to pay the year's interest on it, my girl, you see," argued Michael, "that way, because it will pretty nearly all be back in the office in the nine months."

Esther made no reply to this, it was unconvincing to her instinctive dread of debt. She looked gloomily out over the busy harbour, noting the boats at anchor dragging at their moorings, and the bobbing of the buoys swept half under by the strong incoming tide, with a dull presage of coming trouble at her heart.

"Horrible money!" she exclaimed impetuously, "oh, I wish we'd never thought about it."

"What's the use of talking in that childish fashion?" said Carne angrily. "The paper is signed and the thing's done, and I've got it, so what shall we gain by all this fuss? I thought you had more sense, Esther."

The girl understood the disappointment and anxiety that made his voice hard. She was moved at once with a quick impulse of compunction. Turning quickly to him she passed her arm through his, and smiled at him with a confidence she forced herself to realize.

"I do believe I'm the most selfish thing living, dad. Forgetting you did it all for my pleasure. Looking at the dark side in a most disgraceful way. A nice sort of daughter! Forgive me, dad. Take away your sad face now, and put on a nice pleasant face, and we'll go this very minute and choose the paper I wanted."

Carne kissed her affectionately, and a thought passed through his mind that she was a beautiful woman, as he looked into the velvety brown eyes, coaxing him to cheerfulness. The broad forehead and noble brow, shaded by dusky, wind-blown hair that seemed to belong to no other woman than Esther, for it was unlike any other hair.

"God bless you, my girl," he said tenderly, "you're like your poor mother in your way of looking."

"I'm like you in all the rest, dad," said Esther, "and nearly as tall, and *quite* as strong, and *not* nearly as clever; so you must just put up with me and come for the paper, and the beehives; now don't let us forget the beehives; we can't get any bees, too, can we, dad?"

Michael laughed, but he shook his head.

"Bees are not good messmates, I should fancy," he said, "you'll have to get them nearer home."

Esther considered as they walked along towards the town. "Bees, bees, bees," she said to herself, then suddenly stopping in the road. "Of *course*, dad. The funny little person with the billy-cock hat and the blind dog, she keeps bees. I dare say I can buy a swarm from her, and she'll tell me all about it, too; what was her name?—Mrs. Fearey! I liked her, dad, didn't you? she was such a real kind of person; I believe she'd be a true friend, don't you think so?"

Carne assented absently. Now Esther had recovered he was reverting to his normal state; yet all the time glad to see her gay, and in a manner pleased at the new excitement.

Esther chose the papers with little exclamations of delighted admiration. Beauty in any form was a keen pleasure to her. Carne had measured the three little rooms unknown to her, two bedrooms and sitting-room. Her spirits rose as she saw how small the expense was.

"Fancy only tenpence a piece for that lovely pink paper," she exclaimed, as they came out of the shop after ordering the parcel to be sent to the boat. "Don't you think, dad, we could afford some stuff for curtains?—muslin curtains would be the making of the house."

Muslin was bought—enough for three little pairs. Then Michael Carne decided that he wanted plain serge curtains as well, because there were no blinds, and when winter came there would be draughts. Old Tewkesbury had never troubled about curtains, he pinned an old sack across his window in winter, when the candle was lighted.

A pretty hearthrug was added to the curtain material; after all, what was seven shillings and elevenpence, said Michael, when it would be the making of the rooms! A few odds and ends were remembered as they wandered down the High Street—a new kettle, four table-knives, a little crockery; old Uncle Tewkesbury had considered one mug sufficient for his needs.

"It will be the most lovely place in the village," said Esther, as they started back towards the harbour. "Now nothing but the beehives, two beehives, not expensive ones, and then we shall settle down and work and work, and be as happy as the day is long."

Carne felt happy too. The girl's joy was a keen pleasure to him, and the sense of money possession also. The present was easy; the future distant.

That evening the *Brown Bird* turned her nose homewards, and ran Durlmouth way with her brown wings at full stretch; high in the water, but rich in

household treasures, she seemed to rejoice with her owners, and made a splendid return journey, arriving in the early summer morning, and able to run up to the mill with the fair wind as she was so light without a cargo.

Esther's impatience was not greater than her father's to see the little home pretty.

Michael set to work at once. He was clever at most jobs, and this was not a difficult one, nor tiresome, as the walls had not been papered before, and required no preparation but a good washing.

No one disturbed their work through the day. But even Michael forgot to comment on the unfriendliness of neighbours in the growing interest of renovation, while Esther stitched at curtains, polished the table and little chiffonier, and attacked the dim old mantel-glass with whitening and paraffine-oil.

On the afternoon of the following day Esther, finding she could do no more indoors till the bedrooms were further advanced, decided to pay a visit to Mrs. Emma Fearey.

"Father," she said, "I can't do anything more here now till you've got the paper on; I'm going to find out about the bees."

"Ah," said Carne, pausing in his labour of slapping the ceiling with his wide flat brush. He was standing on a plank resting on two chairs and his head almost touched the ceiling. "You can't get on up here, my girl, but this will soon be through."

"How beautiful it looks," said Esther, with enthusiasm.

Carne smiled. "Don't know about 'beautiful,' the place looks pretty well messed up, seems so to me, but it won't be so bad to-morrow."

"Oh, father," said the girl, with her quick emphatic way, "why the whole place is fifty times as light to begin with—the rooms look bigger, and you seem

to breathe such a fresh air. I do so love to see it pretty ; father, it was good of you to do it all for me, it makes me so happy."

"There, run along and get your bees, my girl, I'm glad enough you're pleased," and the dark face softened into pleasant lines.

Esther strolled easily through the little garden and out of the rickety gate. "That will have to be seen to," she thought, looking back to smile up at the little window in the thatch, from whence issued the energetic slapping sound of the big brush. "When the thatch is mended, and the door painted, it will be like a house on a Christmas-card, just a picture," and she wandered up the road humming to herself.

A turn towards the downs, round the end of Big Field, a stretch of straight narrow road between the hedges, a dip towards the sea again, just before the by-road joined the wider and better made main-road, and on the left side, turning their backs to the broken ground that swept up to the cliff edge, and facing the great upland curve of the down, two little cottages leaned against each other in a cosy corner. Built like Esther's home of rubble, concrete, and plaster, with a thatched roof, they were just as pretty, and just as wanting in modern advantages of light and space. Perhaps in a town such houses would have been unhealthy, but here, nestling year after year in the corner of the sweet free stretch of fern-sprinkled heath, with the pure air from the tall downs fanning the thatch, and the rush of the salt-laden gale from the ocean sweeping every crack and cranny, they were cosy little English homes, where people had lived out long hard-working lives in peace and better health than is given to the generality.

Esther's beauty-loving nature missed no detail of the scene.

"And the gardens," she thought, as she paused at the gate, "both lovely. Mrs. Fearey said hers was the one with the best garden, which is the best!"

Both gardens were full of flowers, but in one the planting was stiffer and more regular. Both seemed rich in vegetables, but in one the flowers and vegetables grew together, and in the other, the latter were arranged in neat little patches, carefully separated by borders of round stones.

"I think the other one is the prettiest," thought Esther, after a moment's contemplation of the neat lines of pebbles, and she went up and knocked at the nearest door.

A low murmur came from inside, as she knocked it was checked, a chair squeaked on the stone floor, and a slow step crossed the kitchen. The door opened, and Esther saw at once that she had come to the wrong house, for the woman that appeared was not her quaint little visitor of the previous week.

In the doorway stood a slender, frail-looking old woman, neatly dressed in black, with a little knitted crossover shawl on her shoulders in spite of the warm weather. She was very white, her face was soft, thin, and colourless, and her white hair rested smoothly under a neat old-fashioned cap of black lace with little velvet strings tied under the chin.

Esther noticed that even her hands were white; thin, hard-working hands that had put in many stitches, and spent many an hour in the wash-tub.

"Does Mrs. Fearey live here?" asked Esther shyly.

"Mrs. Fearey lives next door, miss," said the old woman, in a voice as soft as one would have expected from her gentle face.

The eyes of the woman and the girl met, and Esther was startled at the depth of placid beauty shadowed in the quiet eyes, that seemed to speak of strength quite unwarranted by the frail white face.

"Mary," interrupted a feeble voice from within, "who is that you're talking to? I wish you'd shut the door, the draught seems to catch me to-day."

The old woman addressed as Mary laid her hand quickly on Esther's arm, and drawing her into the kitchen, shut the door.

"Excuse me, my dear," she said in her soft voice, "but my sister's a great invalid; a very great sufferer, and we have to consider her."

Esther advanced rather nervously to the arm-chair set by the fire-place, in which a tiny fire kept the kettle singing.

"My sister's a great sufferer with the dropsy," said the old woman addressed as Mary, "and her breath is a terrible trial to her. I was just about getting her a drop of tea; won't you sit down, my dear, it will brighten her up a bit to see a visitor?"

Esther was not much accustomed to suffering in its acute forms. She looked with a shrinking of intense pity and shocked horror at the poor distorted figure that sat so uneasily in the arm-chair; at the haggard face with its deep purple eye-sockets.

"I'm so sorry to see you so ill," said the girl, hardly knowing how to begin.

"It's nothing new. I've been getting worse this five years," she was interrupted by a husky cough and difficulty in breathing. "It's my breath as seems the worse trial, though; not being able to lie down of a night."

"Oh how dreadful," exclaimed Esther, her expressive face paling with pity. "How *can* you bear it? you *must* be brave."

A curious smile flickered round the mouth of the invalid.

"Many here could tell you that I'm not by any means always brave. I'm a bad-tempered grumbler most of my time. I find it 'most too hard to

remember that it's the Lord's will, and I fight against it something terrible at times. But there, He knows it's a heavy burden. You're a new face, my dear, I don't seem to recollect you in Durlmouth?"

Esther was glad to answer the question, and gave her little history to the keen interest of the two old women.

"Only think as you should be poor Esther Tewkesbury's grand-daughter. I mind her when she was a bit of a girl, but she was a piece older than we was, Mary," said the invalid eagerly. "And so her brother forgave her and left his bit to her son. Well, I never! He was terrible set against her marrying a foreigner, so I've heard—Durlmouth folk always did hold together."

Esther sat a few minutes longer answering the eager questions, and then she rose to go.

"I must go now," she said, smiling, "I was on my way to ask Mrs. Fearey about bees; I want her to sell me a swarm to put in my new hive."

"I doubt she's got a swarm just at present," said old Mary thoughtfully. "However, you'll soon see. Her bees seem very quiet, but ours look like moving; they've been fussing a bit these two days; but it's terrible late in the season, my dear, they won't do much this year."

"I don't want them to," exclaimed Esther eagerly. "Of course I never thought of having honey this year; I only want them to settle down in our garden happily, and feel as though they were at home. Good-bye; thank you so much for being so kind to me."

A sudden smile lighted the quiet face of the old woman.

"If you'd come in time and again, my dear, and talk to my poor sister, you'd be doing a true kindness. To take her mind off herself, that's what she wants."

"Oh, I will," said Esther warmly, "only how can she take her mind off herself when she is in such dreadful suffering night and day?"

Old Mary looked at the beautiful girl before her, standing with such ease and grace in her health and strength.

"Ah, my dear, you're young," she said in her soft way, "it seems too bad to be borne; but trouble comes to all of us one way and another. Trouble of the body, or the mind, or the heart; and I don't know that the body pain is the worst to bear. When it comes, the power to bear it mostly comes too, I seem to think. The good God has promised the help, and His promises never fail."

Esther looked thoughtful, but the idea did not touch her as reality. God was an abstract mystery to her, and not a Being that brought any feeling of strength and comfort to her, such ideas were connected with old age and death and sorrow, things far away in the years to come. But she greatly admired old Mary's "goodness," as she would have called this patient peace, for her heart and nature were keenly in sympathy with all that was noble, heroic, and beautiful in character as well as in creation.

"I think you are very good," she said, with one of her impulsive enthusiasms.

"Oh, my dear, no," said the old woman wistfully, "not good, only we've learned a deal by the troubles the Lord has asked us to carry, and, last of all, we've learned to thank Him for the burden."

The last words were spoken almost too low for a listener, and they were, moreover, interrupted by the piercing voice of Mrs. Fearey, who emerged from her own door at the sound of talking.

"Oh, Mary Richards, it's you, is it; I couldn't think what all the talking was about."

"Esther Carne mistook our house for yours,"

answered old Mary placidly, "and we kept her talking a bit ; it's quite heartened Susan up, hearing a bit of news, and remembering the days when we went to school along of Esther Tewkesbury. Well, good-day to you, Mrs. Fearey, good-day, my dear." The door shut gently and she was gone.

"Now, whatever made you mistake the house?" exclaimed Mrs. Fearey cheerfully, leading the way into her own dwelling, "I told you plain enough mine was the house with the best garden. I don't know what you call best, but I do know what every stone in my borders cost me. What with the back-ache, and what with Trixie disliking the walk to the shore to get the stones, and keeping on so about carrying the basket."

Esther murmured an apology, she saw that ideas on the subject of beauty differ very much, and was afraid Mrs. Fearey was offended, but the little woman was too large-hearted to be ruffled by small jealousies.

"And now you *are* here, my dear, sit down," she said, "and let me make you a bit of toast. I was just getting tea when Baby went to the door and sniffed and sniffed, then he whined and fretted, then he scratted on the door. 'Whatever *has* come to you, child?' I says, 'for goodness' sake sit down and take your tea like a Christian.' But no. 'Mother,' he says, as plain as a child can speak, 'there's somebody new outside, you just come and have a look.' Well, at first I wouldn't give way to him. 'Even supposing there is,' I says, 'it's no business of yours ; curiosity,' I says, 'carried to a pitch does a deal of mischief.' But there, he wouldn't be denied. I opens the door at last, and there you were just coming out of next door with Mary Richards."

Esther laughed, and sat down, while the old sheep-dog sat down also, on her dress, and laying his grey chin on her knee looked thoughtfully into her face.

"You just look at him," exclaimed Mrs. Fearey admiringly, as she cut the toast, or rather the bread for the toast.

"Don't make that for me," said Esther, "please don't trouble."

"My dear," said Mrs. Fearey in quite a solemn tone, as she straightened her hat which had slipped to one side, "a bit of toast dipped in his tea is what Trixie takes, year in year out. He'd think his poor mother was gone raving wild if he didn't see his toast on the table." She knelt down on the hearthrug made of knitted bits of cloth, and proceeded to make the toast, with a running commentary of remarks, while Esther looked round the room.

There was much to look at. A little collection of curiosities from many lands. Strange shells, and bits of rock and coral. Strange fish, blown out like bladders and covered with spikes. A case of humming-birds, stuffed; a case of weird beetles, like creatures out of dream-land; and many photographs on the walls and in frames.

"Ah, my dear, you may well look," said Mrs. Fearey, "my father was in her Majesty's Navy before ever he went into the coastguard service. Here you'll find queer things from the China seas and mercy knows where. The face of the fish alone is enough to make you think you've eaten cucumber the last thing. The shells are sweetly pretty; sometimes when I look at them I can't believe but what they've been made in some of our pottery towns; there's nothing but the sound of the sea in them to prove to you that they're God Almighty's handiwork; you get up and look round. Those humming-birds from the West Indies came from my husband's father, and the trouble I've had with them, considering the moth, is something cruel, you'd never believe."

Esther got up and wandered round the little room,

looking at one thing after another with delighted comments and interest.

Presently she stopped before the little sideboard and picked up a cabinet photograph set in a frame of tiny shells stuck on cardboard. The portrait was that of a young man of perhaps eight-and-twenty, powerfully built, with great width of chest and fine shoulders. He was dressed in a guernsey, with a number on the chest, and pilot-coat, and a sou'-wester hat pushed back, from under the brim of which clear piercing eyes looked out with entire absence of self-consciousness. The nose was straight and rather wide at the nostrils; the mouth firmly closed and delicate in outline. The chin unusually square; almost too square, as the bones of the jaw seemed to project beyond the ears. The whole face conveyed the impression of extreme force and tenacity of purpose.

Esther continued to look at it; the fearless direct gaze of the eyes fascinated her.

"What have you got there?" inquired Mrs. Fearey, looking up from the toast she was arranging on the tea-table, and as the girl made no answer, she advanced and looked over her shoulder.

"Ah," she said, "you're looking at him, are you; that's our Steve. My own brother's son, the last of the lot. Stephen Weld, the best-looking man and the finest pilot on the whole south coast."

CHAPTER V

ESTHER FINDS ENEMIES

“ND,” continued Mrs. Fearey, sitting down to the table and pouring out a cup of tea which she handed to Esther, “the obstinacy of that boy is beyond anything. ‘Have your picture done in your Sunday clothes, Steve,’ I said. ‘No, aunt,’ he said, ‘if I put on my Sunday clothes I shall look like anybody. If I keep on my working-dress I’ll look like a pilot, and that’s what I am.’ There you have Steve all over. He’s all for truth, and what he’s said, he’ll do.”

Esther laughed a little, more in amusement at the little woman’s energetic manners than at the account of Stephen Weld’s peculiarities.

“I expect he’s rather like you,” she said mischievously, “I can quite fancy that you would do what you say.”

Mrs. Fearey was flattered. She nodded her head impressively as she poured out the tea into Trixie’s saucer, and fed him with little bits of toast soaked in it.

“My dear,” she said, “there you have Emma Fearey. My own way I do like; unless it’s flying in the face of Providence, when it comes to that we have to set our own wills to one side; but what I’ve said I’ll do, that I will do; and that’s how I came to make the garden what it is. The journeys I made for those stones you’d never believe. When Steve saw what I’d been doing, he says, ‘Aunt, why didn’t you wait for me and the barrow?’”

“‘Would *you* have waited for anybody if you’d made up your mind to do a thing?’ I says. ‘No,’

says he, 'I would not.' 'Well,' says I, 'and I wouldn't neither.' So there we are. I don't deny," continued Mrs. Fearey, thoughtfully placing Trixie's saucer on the mat and filling it up with milk, "I don't deny but it has its drawbacks sometimes; but it's Weld nature."

"I should think it is rather useful in a man," said Esther quickly, and she gave a little sigh; something of the difficulties of their lives caused by her own father's want of this one feature seemed to rise in her mind and shadow her eyes. Not to be impressionable, not to fluctuate, not to be influenced and swayed by conflicting emotions, seemed to Esther to be very desirable at that moment.

"It's stood Steve well," said his aunt, her bright eyes resting on the girl's face and divining instinctively some of the trouble. "But there, we are not all made alike; and a good thing too, for we should never agree if we were."

After that the talk left Stephen Weld's characteristics, and bees were considered seriously.

Mrs. Fearey thought that the next-door bees meant business, though it was so late in the year, and resting her sharp chin on her hand she whispered over the table to Esther.

"If you can see your way to taking Mary Richards' bees, the bit of money would come in useful. *They* never let on, and never complain; but, dearie me, how they live I can't think."

"But they look so neat, and they don't seem worried," said Esther, "I thought they must be well off."

"Well off," echoed Mrs. Fearey scornfully. "Two shillings and a loaf from the parish. Then Mary gets half-a-crown a week from the family she lived with so long. You see it was this way. Mary and Susan are sisters. Susan married a pilot and settled in Durlmouth; some ten years ago he was drowned, and

she fell in bad health. They'd no children, and might have saved a bit, but he was all for——" here Mrs. Fearey lifted an empty cup and made as though she drank from it. "*There* you are ; he was a good fellow enough, but easy ; all for treating friends when he was in cash ; never looking ahead. One day he's drowned, and poor Susan is left with nothing. She went out to work as long as she could, and when the dropsy took her, she was in terrible straits till Mary came. Now *she'd* been in service, and done well, she married a coachman, and they lived a lifetime in the same service. He was taken and she was left ; but her master and mistress was good to her beyond anything. They put her in the lodge, and allowed her five shilling a week for opening the gates."

"Had she any children?" asked Esther interested.

"Yes, she'd a family," said Mrs. Fearey in a gloomy tone. "Five ; four died when they were growing up, and the only one she reared turned out a terrible cross to her. He took to bad companions and evil ways, and got a term of imprisonment."

"How awful," murmured Esther.

"Ah, my dear, it was awful. He killed a man in some row. I forget the rights of it, but I believe he was breaking into a business place. It was a shocking thing, and he had to serve his term down here too."

"*Here*," exclaimed Esther, startled.

"Well, near enough ; at the big convict prison at Black Rock Head. He was there when Mary came to live with her sister, and many's the time I've seen her going up to the cliff alone at night, and watched her sitting so still on the edge there with her face turned towards the shadow of the Bill away out at sea. Then about three years ago he tried to escape, after attacking a warder, and got shot. They did all they could for him, so I heard, but he died."

"Why did she come to live so near?" said Esther impulsively, "I couldn't if I'd been her."

"Oh bless you, my dear, Mary Richards never considers herself," said Mrs. Fearey, setting her hat straight again, which had become deranged in the energy of narration. "What she was thinking of, was her sister Susan Wallis and her bad health. Why her friends were all against her coming, and she seemed to leave all she cared for in the old home, her husband's and children's graves, and the friends she'd spent her life with. But there it was. She seemed to see it was her duty to break up her little home and come to take care of Susan, so she did it."

"Why couldn't Mrs. Wallis go to her?" asked Esther quickly.

Mrs. Fearey shrugged her shoulders a little.

"Well, my dear, she was in poor health. She'd lived in Durlmouth all her life, in that house next door."

"Did Mary Richards give up her five shillings a week, too, besides her home and everything else?" Esther spoke with a little flush of indignation.

"They allow her half-a-crown a week, and a pound at Christmas for coal," said Mrs. Fearey; "and it's very kind, very thoughtful. She feels it so."

"And is that all they have?" said the girl. "Oh how patient some people are. And rent to come out of it; they *can't* do it, Mrs. Fearey."

Mrs. Fearey pursed up her lips and looked hard at the girl's handsome face, so full of enthusiasm and pity. Then she leaned both elbows on the table, and tipped her chair forward. Trixie pricked up his ears and gave a sharp short bark, her air of mystery was infectious. Mrs. Fearey put a hand on his head and patted it gently.

"Every month," she said in a solemn tone, "they get a postal order for ten shillings—postmark Rockhampton—and *that* pays the rent."

"Who from?" said Esther.

"Ah," said Mrs. Fearey slowly, drawing back and folding her hands in her lap while she looked fixedly at Esther, "that's just it, who from?"

"Don't they know then?" asked the girl.

"Know," echoed Mrs. Fearey, "no, they do not know."

Esther looked at the little woman's face, so full of suppressed mystery, and an idea occurred to her.

"Do *you* know?" she said.

"I guess," said Mrs. Fearey, "I think I may say I am not mistaken. But it's a dead secret. No one but me knows they get it, and no one but me guesses who it comes from."

"It must be some one really nice," said Esther, "especially if they are not rich."

"It is some one nice," said Mrs. Fearey, suddenly, "it's our Steve."

"Stephen," Esther exclaimed, surprised, then she stopped and looked at Mrs. Fearey, in whose bright black eyes there was a suspicious glisten of softness.

"But there, whatever made me tell you, my dear?" said Mrs. Fearey, suddenly getting up and beginning to put her cups together. "Steve would be cut to the soul if he thought any one guessed."

"It is good of you to tell me so much," said Esther. "Of course I shouldn't speak of it. I have no friends but you; I never talk."

"Ah well, my dear, I'm your friend, and there you spoke truly," said the little woman. "What, going! well, come and see Trixie and me again; rain or shine, we stick to our friends. In this world poor human souls must help each other along as the Almighty decrees, He never intended each to stand alone. Well, good-bye, my dear, and——" Here she nodded mysteriously towards the adjoining cottage, and with many signs and hints recalled to Esther the

benefit that a transaction in bees would be to the old women next door.

The girl smiled. "I shan't forget," she said, and ran down the path. At the gate she stopped to look back at Mrs. Fearey, who was giving Trixie permission to go for a little stroll alone, with strict injunctions about the moment of return and the direction he was to take.

"To the corner and back," Esther heard her say, "is as far as a child of your age should go without his mother ; and now don't you take advantage, or you'll be brought back a corpse one of these days, and break your poor mother's heart."

Esther held the gate open, and smiled back at Mrs. Fearey as the old dog passed through without a glance to right or left, and turning down towards the main road, proceeded on his prescribed walk with stiff gait and cramped limbs. Then she turned the other way, and went back along the lane to the village, thinking.

There was much to think about. The three old women with their various characters and strange, tragic life stories.

"I never thought," said Esther, suddenly, half aloud, "that there were so many brave people in the world." Slowly she reviewed what she had learned that afternoon in her own mind, and shivered a little in spite of the warm sun and soft summer air. Life, always in pain night and day, in bitter discomfort and hourly torment ; life, with nothing to live for, with loved ones dead, disgraced, and shamed before all the world ; spent in waiting on a querulous invalid. That was what she had seen that afternoon, and she had also seen that these two much tried ones were full of patience and courage ; the one ashamed of the complaints that would sometimes come against her better will ; and the other entirely and utterly

forgetful of self and all its many demands, given up to unselfish work for the love of God. What she had seen did not pass lightly over Esther's nature, but went straight to her heart with strange thoughts and speculations as to what a *reality* God must be to these two souls who bore so much for His love.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a child crying; and a minute more revealed a little creature of some three years old sitting on the side of the road sobbing bitterly. Esther hastened towards it, and kneeling down asked what was the matter in coaxing tones. At first she was answered only by renewed cries, and much rubbing of very dirty little fists over still dirtier cheeks, but presently an eye peeped between the stumpy fingers, and after regarding her carefully there was a murmur of "Knee."

"Oh, *poor* knee," exclaimed Esther sympathetically, as the other hand pulled away the pinafore, and a fat knee badly grazed and stained with gravel and dirt was revealed. "Dear, dear, this is sad," as the tears burst out afresh at sight of the damaged member. "Now I'm going to carry you *all* the way home to mother," and in a moment Esther lifted the sturdy little person, and in spite of faint resistance at first, went on towards the village talking reassuringly in her soft deep voice.

As she turned the corner of the steep bank on which her own home was perched, she encountered a small boy strolling leisurely towards her and throwing stones as he came.

"Hullo," said Esther, "can you tell me where this little girl lives?"

The little girl in question began to kick to get down with vigorous legs.

"Oh no, no," said Esther, laughing, "I'm not going to let you walk till that poor knee is washed."

The small boy regarded her indifferently, then he said—

“It’s our Lily.”

“Oh, Lily is she,” and Esther smiled to herself at the absolute unlikeness of the sturdy little person in her arms to the flower in question. “Well, Lily’s tumbled down and hurt her knee, and I’m just going to carry her into my home and wash it with a little warm water, and then you can show me where she lives.”

“She tumbled down up the road,” remarked the little boy.

“You oughtn’t to have left her,” said Esther, trying to speak severely, but really amused.

“She wouldn’t come along,” and the stone throwing was resumed, accompanied by whistling.

“Come into my garden,” said Esther, opening the gate with one hand, while she held the child with the other arm, making a pretty picture if she had known it as she looked down at the unchivalrous brother.

In a few minutes the knee was washed and neatly bound up with a piece of linen rag, and Esther was answering many questions put to her by the small brother, who took a keen interest in the mysterious house where “Miser Tewkesbury” had lived, and which he had never before had a chance of exploring.

Michael Carne came down-stairs with his pail and the news that up-stairs was finished now all but the papering; and was not a little surprised to see the influx of visitors talking busily and apparently quite at home.

“I am just going to take Lily home,” said Esther, smiling. “*Oh*, what a dirty face; come, we mustn’t let anybody see that face, it would frighten them quite away.”

The face, much puckered up, was washed; and Esther left the house carrying the child, whose fat arms

were now clasped vigorously round her neck, while the small guide ran by her side, still talking.

"I'll be back in a minute to get your tea, father," she called back over her shoulder; and the party proceeded on its way.

"I don't know your name yet, do I?" said Esther, looking down at the battered cap that bobbed along by her side.

"I'm young Reuben Kentfield, that's who I am. And my dad's got *Three Sisters*, the best ketch in Durlmouth; and when I'm a man I'm going aboard her, and sometimes I goes to Salterne and Rockhampton now."

"My dad's got the *Brown Bird*," said Esther, "so we've both got big boats to sail in."

There was a pause, then the small boy asked cautiously—

"Is your dad the foreigner, then?"

"My dad comes from Cornwall way," answered Esther, with a little drawing together of her black brows.

"Then my dad's only waiting to pay him out for taking our trade," and the small informer nodded confidentially, "and Will Mew's going to pay him out, and so's Mr. Haynes. And they're going to drive him out of Durlmouth pretty soon; one way and another, dad says, they'll make it nasty for him."

A dark flush spread over Esther's face, but it faded quickly, leaving her colourless. She said nothing, though the pulse in her neck beat strongly. The little boy glanced up at her.

"I don't think foreigners are bad," he said rather timidly. "I like *Brown Bird*, she goes so fast."

Esther's mouth relaxed.

"Never mind, sonny," she said, "you be a good lad, and some day you'll be a fine sailor and have a big ketch of your own."

They had reached the gate that led to the cottages wherein lived the Kentfields and Saunders. Esther walked straight up to the door, and was about to knock when it opened. Some one had been watching her come up the path; in fact more than one had been watching her, for Mrs. Saunders' door opened at the same time, and her sharp face appeared full of eager curiosity.

Esther said to the stout pale woman who confronted her—

"Are you Mrs. Kentfield, because I found your little girl Lily crying in the road beyond our house?"

"What were you doing up there, you bad girl?" exclaimed Mrs. Kentfield.

The child began to whimper and sob.

"She had fallen down and cut her knee rather badly," went on Esther, setting the little figure gently on the doorstep.

"I've told you times on times you're not to go up the road, you naughty child. That's for your disobedience."

There was a sharp slap on the fat arms, a burst of shrieks, Lily was roughly clutched by the arm and flung aside into the kitchen; and Esther found herself standing with door slammed in her face, while little Reuben, seeing the air was stormy, disappeared quickly round to the back with noiseless steps.

Esther stood for a moment on the step, startled even out of any consciousness of anger. She could hear the cries and sobs of poor Lily, and the scoldings of the mother from within; deepest indignation welled up in her mind, she turned from the door with her head held high and shoulders squared, only to find herself face to face with Mrs. Saunders, who was watching her eagerly from the other side of the low hedge partition of fuchsias and box.

Esther had no idea that this little sharp woman,

who rather resembled a ferret with her pointed face and sandy hair, was the wife of the uncourteous miller's man ; acting on sudden impulse she stopped and said, with a little quiver in her voice—

"Why is Mrs. Kentfield so rude to me, what have I done?"

"*Was* she rude, miss?" said Mrs. Saunders, with apparent surprise. "I'm sure I never noticed."

"I only came to bring back her little girl," went on Esther, who felt a natural desire to explain and justify herself.

"Ah," said Mrs. Saunders, looking the girl up and down with keen eyes of disapproval and malevolence. "That's where it is, Mrs. Kentfield was never one to like people interfering with her children."

"But the little girl was hurt," said Esther indignantly, "her knee was all grazed, she was crying in the road, alone ; so I washed her knee and carried her back."

"Ah well," said Mrs. Saunders again, retreating slowly into her house with an air as though she could not go so far as to believe this without evidence of its truth. "I'm sure *I* don't wish to say anything," and she shut the door.

Esther walked quietly down the path holding herself in with difficulty. She would have liked to shake both these suspicious, ill-natured women ; to tell them what she thought of them. Her heart was beating fast, her hands trembling, and burning tears sprang into her eyes.

Suddenly she laughed bitterly.

"Idiot that I am to care. Horrible, spiteful people ; disgusting ill-natured creatures. I don't care. I will fight them all, and show them dad and I can easily live without them."

She dabbed her eyes quickly with a handkerchief, and shook herself a little. Then the words of young

Reuben Kentfield recurred to her mind, and she drew up her head and clenched her hands at her sides. "Pay us out," will they, "cowardly set of bad-hearted men. I won't speak to any of them, even if they speak to me; I'll *hate* them all."

As she entered the house her father looked up from washing his brushes and saw something was amiss; and Esther, in the first impulse of desire for sympathy, told him of her reception at Mrs. Kentfield's.

Michael Carne smiled bitterly. "Didn't I tell you, my girl, how it would be. It's nothing new, I told you so from the first how set against us they all are. Well, I suppose we two can fight the lot, and *Brown Bird* shall do the same for their crazy lot of boats."

Esther was flushed, and in her beautiful eyes was a hard look; she laughed as she set the tea, and her movements were quicker and more noisy than usual.

"We can do without the lot, dad, can't we?"

"Ah, my girl," said Carne, "we can that. *I* never found much good come of being friends with any one myself, they're mostly bad. They get behind your back and do you all the harm they can. Do your own work and let them all go. We've got our pride to stand on, and that will carry us through, we don't want any Durlmouth folk, and we won't be beholden to a soul."

Esther made no demur to a programme which she would have rejected earnestly a few hours before; her insulted feelings and outraged pride blinded her better nature. The memory of the patient lives of her old neighbours, and their *real* troubles nobly borne, was gone from her, swallowed up in bitter indignation.

Her mind was busy in eager schemes for punishing these people who had insulted her; for making them regret the hour they had ever set themselves against

her and her father, and for getting the better of them and their boats in every way possible.

"There's one thing, dad," she said suddenly, after a pause, in which her mind busily reviewed the circumstances. "I think Mr. Emmett the miller likes you and *Brown Bird*, doesn't he?"

Michael drew his pipe from his lips and blew a little cloud of smoke thoughtfully.

"Well, I think Mr. Emmett keeps an open mind. He's about the hardest-headed chap I've ever met with. The little I've seen of him looks like this: he goes *his* way, and he gets all he can out of everybody. He wouldn't take any side, he'd just employ what labour paid him best."

"But he always seems to give *Brown Bird* the best chance, doesn't he, dad?"

"No, my dear, not really. It is just that *Brown Bird* is a faster boat, better managed. She was ready when the others were asleep. They're a pretty heavy lot down here, it takes all the world to wake them up. The miller, he's as sharp as needles, and he's always trying to stir them up to a little energy; but there, they didn't care as long as they'd got it all their own way. Durlmouth is not the only place that's dozing on the south coast here."

Esther laughed.

"Durlmouth wouldn't be bad if it wasn't for the people."

Carne assented.

Presently he said, as his mind flew to another topic—

"Do you know, I believe we'll have to have this whole roof re-thatched."

"Oh, father, surely not," said Esther in dismay.

"I've been looking at it carefully," went on Michael, "inside and out, and all round; the wet comes in in twenty places, it's a regular sieve round the chimneys.

To make a really good job it'll have to be done all over, we can't patch it, it would be work and money wasted. Besides, there are the new ceilings now, they look as nice as can be up-stairs, and we can't let the new papers be spoilt ; they will be if something isn't done, for the old streaks of wet, where the rain has come in in winter, are there on the walls plain to see."

"Won't it cost a lot ?" said Esther doubtfully.

"Oh well, it will of course, a matter of ten or twelve pounds," said Michael gloomily.

"Oh, dad, how dreadful. All that money on the roof. Why, think what we've spent already."

"Well, it's no use talking about that," said Carne, impatiently knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "It's always the way with me. I'm the most unlucky man ever born, and what seems to be a bit of luck turns out to be not worth having, after all."

CHAPTER VI

MRS. FEAREY HELPS IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

IN about ten days' time Esther asked Mrs. Fearey to tea in the completed house. The thatch was perfect ; the door and window-frames were painted ; the papers were on ; the curtains up ; and the new rug displayed in all its beauty.

The bitter spirit that had held sway over Esther's heart ever since the day of her encounter with Mrs. Kentfield and Mrs. Saunders seemed to be laid for the time at least, and her expressive face was full of happiness.

Mrs. Fearey called round in the morning to say

she was going to take Mary Richards' swarm that day; and on the strength of it Esther asked her to tea.

"Arn't you afraid, Mrs. Fearey?" asked the girl, amused at the resolute air of the little woman.

"Afraid, *I afraid!* my dear, you don't know Emma Fearey. Times out of number I've managed the bees of half the village; *I* know their ways, don't you make a mistake. It's a late swarm, but that don't matter, as you're not set on honey this year, and there's time for them to make enough to keep themselves all winter, pretty dears, with perhaps a saucer of sugar now and again. I've got an old straw hive I'll shake 'm into, my dear, and then I'll bring it round, and have them in the fine new hive before you could crack a nut. There, I can't wait, Mary Richards' garden is all alive, you should just hear the music. I *believe* they're going to settle on the old laburnum tree by the pump, outside the wash-house."

"Oh, can I come and watch?" cried Esther after the retreating figure.

"Watch, bless you, no; the bees don't like to be looked at, *I* always find. I've got a way with them, but they're not folk as cotton to everybody," and the active little figure clapped away down the path on the tall clogs, calling to Trixie who pranced stiffly behind aware that something exciting was about to break the monotony of everyday existence.

Esther cleared away dinner early, set the house in perfect order, laid out a tempting tea, and waited full of expectation. Her father had gone down to see the miller on business, and also to overhaul *Brown Bird*, whose needs had been set aside since the work on the house had demanded all their care and attention.

For the twentieth time Esther ran to the door to look, on hearing a noise in the road, and beheld a curious spectacle approaching.

Mrs. Fearey, strangely attired, and carrying in her arms an old straw hive, from the interior of which issued a deep musical boom, while around her head circled a halo of excited followers.

Esther flew towards the gate, but the intrepid Mrs. Fearey warned her off with cries and violent head-shaking.

"Get away, get away, my dear. They're touchy as can be. Trixie can't hardly get on with them to-day, and in a usual way they'll behave like lambs to him. Come along, come along, my dearie boy, they're only teasing; don't you take no notice." And she swept past the corner of the house towards the sheltered nook where the new hive was set, followed by Trixie stoically indifferent but for sharp shakes of the head and an occasional harmless snap at the worrying, noisy cloud.

Esther leaned against the corner of the cottage and burst into a peal of laughter, while she flapped her apron at angry belated members of the swarm. Mrs. Fearey had on a pilot's sou'-wester hat, of course far too large, and over that her figure was encased to the hips, arms and all, in a dark-green muslin bag, terminating at the wrists in thick gloves. Over her usual boots she wore thick knitted stockings, such as are worn by pilots when out in the cold months, and these, being intended for a large and tall man, appeared to encase her completely.

But in spite of her strange habiliments she was evidently a courageous and experienced bee-keeper, and Esther remained absorbed in watching until all was done.

"I hope you're not stung," she said eagerly; "I was really frightened one minute."

Mrs. Fearey laughed as she looked herself over and shook off the stupid bees who seemed to have lost their way. "No use being frightened when you're in

for it, my dear; if you're going to be frightened never begin—that is a good maxim in most things, and particularly with bees. They'll be all right; I saw the queen, and put her in. They're making a fine old shindy now, but that's only their silly fancies, not being sure where she is, you know. Bees are about the most wonderful of all God Almighty's wonderful creatures, and the more you see of them the more you wonder at the mysteries of the Lord's ways."

"I should like to learn all about them ever so much," said Esther eagerly.

"So you shall, my dear; here, help me off with this, I feel stifled; glad enough shall I be of a cup of tea. Trixie, lad, come here and let mother look at you, and see if the silly things gave you a pinch when their fancies had run away with their common-sense."

Trixie submitted to be looked over, but he was scathless, much to Mrs. Fearey's satisfaction, and the party sat down to the table with a sense of good work well done.

"My word, you have smartened up the place," said the little woman presently, as she sat back in her chair and looked round. "Not before it was wanted, though, I must say. Your great-uncle Tewkesbury wouldn't know the place. It was common talk in the village that he was a miser, and had put by a pot of money."

"If he did, we never got any of it," said Esther gaily.

"Never got any of it," echoed Mrs. Fearey, setting down her cup in genuine surprise. "Why, my dear, however did your father manage——? I beg your pardon, I'm sure, don't let me seem to be in anyways pressing to know other people's business."

"You're never that, Mrs. Fearey," said Esther heartily. "No, I *really* mean it. We got the house, as it was, and what furniture he had, which was very little—we brought our own chiefly, you know—and, of

course, the garden. The garden seemed to be his chief thought, poor old man. He put in the will that if father would take care of it as he had always done he'd find it would be a great advantage to him, or something like that; there was a sort of special injunction to us not to neglect the garden, but to dig it and plant it well, and we should find good would come of it."

"Good mostly does come of honest work, however you take it," said Mrs. Fearey cheerfully. "But I never should have thought he had no money to leave."

"Why? He lived like a poor man," said Esther, "and the house was very shabby. I confess I did hope at first that we should find some money hidden like you read of in stories. I hunted out that little side-board from end to end, and we had a regular turn out. There were no loose planks or loose bricks in the hearth like you read of sometimes. I really believe he was poor, and kept himself alive by the garden-stuff, he seemed to love the garden."

"He was always working in it," said Mrs. Fearey, feeding Baby with soaked toast. "*Always*. Day and night, you might almost say, for I've seen him sometimes at work after dark, and in the moonlight too. That's where it is, you must love something. But your father's spent a pretty penny on the place, seemingly. Not that it isn't well worth it; it pays you over and over."

"Father thought it was well worth it, and so he borrowed a little money on a mortgage to do it with," said Esther.

"Oh, indeed," said the little woman, with a startled look at the girl.

"It is very little, of course," said Esther, conscious of the surprise, "and we shall easily return it in the year. The interest is very little, because we went to

the best lawyer and got it from a real good man ; it is not like a dangerous money-lender, you see."

"Ah, that's well," said Mrs. Fearey, trying to look satisfied.

"We went to Mr. Norman and Mr. Platt of Rockhampton," said Esther rather proudly. "They wrote out uncle's will and kept it, you know. They are very safe gentlemen."

"Oh, they are, no doubt," said the little woman thoughtfully ; "and do they lend the money ?"

Esther shook her head. "Not themselves. They said a client, a man who was rich and very respectable, lent it for one year at a low interest."

"Ah," said Mrs. Fearey, again thoughtfully. Then throwing off her little air of anxiety, she said, "Well, you and Mr. Carne will soon make it up if you're brisk, and you'll get a lot of pleasure out of the house. There's nothing like work, however you look at it. Ah, here he is, in time for a cup of tea."

As she spoke the tall figure of Michael Carne darkened the doorway. He was carrying a large bundle of brown sails in his arms, which he threw down in a corner without a word.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Carne," said Mrs. Fearey cheerfully ; "lovely day, isn't it ?"

"Can't say I've thought much about the weather, ma'am ; there are some things that drive it out of your head. Nice place this Durlmouth of yours, and nice sort of folk live in it, when a man can't leave his boat a week without watching."

"What's the matter, father ?" asked Esther anxiously ; while Mrs. Fearey's black eyes glanced from the hard face of the Cornishman to the pile of brown sailcloth, without remark.

"I went to the mill and saw Mr. Emmett about the carrying. Haynes' boat has gone for coal ; and Mew's went out with flour two days ago. The miller

got a message from Salterne, and wanted some one to go down sharp and fetch some corn waiting; the *Three Sisters* is all behind, as usual, and he offered me the job. Of course I was ready enough, and went down to get all square as I wanted to get out on the top of the flood at five o'clock to-morrow morning. And what do you suppose I find?"

Esther shook her head as he paused. Mrs. Fearey stroked the dog's head softly, and watched him.

"Why, *this!*" and Michael seized the great stiff sail and held it up. A large jagged hole revealed itself. "And look here." He pulled out the under sail, kicking the top one aside, and held that up for inspection; it was slit almost from top to bottom.

There was a gloomy silence. Esther drew herself together and squared her shoulders with the little characteristic attitude in which she always faced a difficulty. Her face paled, and she closed her lips tightly.

"We can mend them," she said presently, in a low voice. Then, after considering, "You haven't got another jib the same size, father?"

Carne shook his head impatiently. "Only the storm-jib," he said. "That would be no use, she won't steer properly with the whole mainsail up if we're only carrying a storm-jib."

"Father," said Esther, getting up and coming over to the pile of sails, "we'll go out at five o'clock to-morrow, same as though it had never happened."

"You talk nonsense," exclaimed Carne angrily.

"Have you got the right needles and a 'palm'?" suddenly asked Mrs. Fearey; she had remained a watchful listener till now.

Carne looked up at Esther, as though asking her. The girl went up to the little sideboard and opened the top drawer, pulled out sail-thread, needles, and a "palm," and laid them on the tea-table. "I can work

as well as you, father," she said eagerly ; " you know I can use a thimble instead of the palm, I don't hurt myself."

Mrs. Fearey got up and gave herself a brisk little shake, then she dragged over the big sails with her small strong hands, and examined the damage with pursed lips.

" Not so bad, but it might be worse," she said at last. " You'll want a big patch on the foresail, it won't spoil the beauty of it, for you've patched it before, I see."

" I don't believe we've got a bit," said Esther anxiously.

" Don't you worry ; I have," said the little woman, measuring the rent with experienced eye. " Why, bless you, my dear, many's the sail I've worked at from morning till night, and sometimes night till morning. I hadn't always enough to live upon even in poor Fearey's time, he was so subject to the bronchitis and asthma in winter, you'd hardly believe, for a stout-looking fellow as he was. Sometimes he couldn't go out half winter, so I practised sail mending, and many's the shilling we got that way ; the men haven't often the time, and the women never seem to be much of a hand."

" Have you really got a piece big enough to cover this ?" said Esther eagerly.

" Say no more, my dear, I've got everything," said Mrs. Fearey, gathering up her bee-dress. " And now if you don't mind I'll trot up home, but I'll come down later and bear a hand with this job."

" How good you are," said Esther earnestly ; " a real kind friend."

" I'm much obliged to you, ma'am," added Michael, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Fearey took the hand, and looked up into the face of the tall dark man with her head on one side like a robin.

"And you needn't call it *my* Durlmouth," she said briskly. "Whatever you find it, the Almighty made it; and the people in it are much like other folk; good enough when they try and be what their Maker intended, and bad enough when they follow their own wills. That is where all the trouble in the world seems to get brewed: in people's own wilful natures. Well, I'll be back pretty soon, don't you worry about the sails; if everything was as easily set right as that we shouldn't have much to complain of," and with a nod, she trotted down the path calling Trixie, and followed by Esther.

At the gate they were encountered by the sight of two small figures; evidently waiting about with a purpose. Young Reuben Kentfield, with a small stick in one hand, and a very large blunt sailor's knife in the other, leaned against the gate-post outside, pretending indifference; while Lily, still dirty and fatter, if possible; not having arrived at the age when it is considered desirable to hide the feelings, frankly flattened her button of a nose on the gate and stared through the bars, holding tightly with both fat hands meanwhile; a neglected doll with one leg and no head lay on the step of the bank below.

As Esther approached, the little boy stared up and down the road with affected indifference; but Lily shook the gate vigorously.

"Hullo, hullo!" exclaimed Mrs. Fearey, peeping over the top of the barrier at the round fat face staring upwards, "and pray what do *you* want?" The gate opened inwards, and Lily let go as the latch was raised, but remained standing in the same place with her fingers pressed over her eyes.

"I expect they want me," said Esther in rather a hard voice. "I brought them in the other day because the baby hurt her knee, and Mrs. Kentfield was as nasty to me as she could be when I took

them back. I don't mean to have them again ; I've no notion of letting them think I want to make up to them."

"Seems as though these young ones wanted to make up to *you*," said Mrs. Fearey cheerfully. "After all, poor things, it wasn't their fault."

"Of course not," said Esther, making no advance however in reply to the wistful peeping of Lily, "I don't blame the children ; but I'm not going to have anything to do with the village. The way they treat us is horrible ; not content with being rude and unkind, now they have tried to damage our boat. I shan't speak to any of them."

Mrs. Fearey's brows gathered with a little troubled pucker, but she made no remark.

"Go home, Lily, like a good child," said Esther distantly. "Reuben, take her back ; you know you ought not to come here, your mother will be cross."

The boy slowly left his position, and with a "Come on, Lil" thrown over his shoulder sauntered into the road whittling the stick.

But Lily had a fixed hope in her small mind, a memory of Esther's strong kind arms and soft cheek ; she had not arrived at a stoical age, therefore her lips fell and heavy tears gathered in her round eyes.

"Oh dearie, dearie me !" said the pilot's widow, with a tenderness that seemed unexpected from her abrupt manner, "crying never did any good yet. Here's my Trixie trying to tell you to cheer up."

This was strictly true, for the old dog fussed round the child, wagging his tail, finally arresting the fall of the tears by licking her whole face in a complete and vigorous manner. Then he picked up the remnants of the doll and carried it to Mrs. Fearey, laying it at her feet with little whines of excitement.

"Now look at that," exclaimed his mistress proudly, "many's the lesson I've learned from the dumb

animal. You see he was reminding us that we've got poor dolly to take care of too. Why, bless me, she's all over dust ; now I shouldn't be surprised if I'd got something."

The little woman plunged her hand into her pocket and drew therefrom a handkerchief in a Paisley pattern with a bright border ; in one minute the crippled doll was gaily arrayed, a safety-pin through her body clinching the matter, and handed over to Lily, whose hands were stretched to receive the treasure.

"Now you run off home and put her to bed ; she's ever so tired all this long time out of bed," continued Mrs. Fearey, lifting the small mother down the steep steps and setting her face homewards. "And don't you cry, whatever you do ; grown mothers don't have no time to cry, there's the babies to be thought about. Here, lad, look after your little sister ; it's what God Almighty put you into the world for principally, to keep off the hard knocks, and show yourself a man. Remember you'll never be able to look after a boat if you can't look after a girl ; there's a wonderful likeness between them at times."

Young Reuben seemed impressed by this argument, and guided Lily down the road by pulling at the shoulder-strap of her pinafore, as a hand was not available, both her fat arms being firmly clasped round the doll, which she was "hushing" in audible tones. The old sheep-dog accompanied the pair for some twenty yards down the road village-wards, and then returned to his mistress, looking in her face and wagging his stump of a tail.

"Quite right, my son, quite right," said Mrs. Fearey approvingly ; "they're young, and they'll want a good bit of care this many years. Well, we must be off home, there's a job or two wants seeing to, and then we'll come back and show them what our fingers are made of."

Esther had remained a spectator of the little scene, and was conscious of a sense of shame and discomfort tugging at her heart; consequently she was the more anxious to justify herself.

"Of course it's nothing to do with the children, but I'm not going to let these people think I want them. It is just as likely that they would say I try to get in with *them*, through the children."

Mrs. Fearey looked up and down the road.

"I don't want to hurt the *children*," said Esther again insistently.

"Eh, dear lass, no, of course you don't," said the little woman, looking up at the girl's fine face kindly. "But that's one of the worst things that comes of the 'paying out' plan; we mostly hurt the wrong people, and ourselves most of all. Nothing in the world does any one so much harm as making a home in their hearts for the evil spirit of revenge."

"They deserve it," said Esther.

"Ah well, we must run, my dear, or the holes will stop as they are in your sails. Come along, sonny," and the old woman disappeared round the corner still talking, while Esther returned indoors, cleared away the tea, put the house right, and got all ready for the evening's work.

Mrs. Fearey had her nightly work to do, of helping Mary Richards get her poor sister to bed. The little woman was strong in spite of her small size, and many things that were done for Susan Wallis could not have been done by old Mary alone. So Mrs. Fearey carried a bright face and interesting description of the settling down of the bees into the neighbouring cottage, but she said nothing of the damage done to Michael Carne's boat, for it was one of her rules never to carry tales.

"'Least said, soonest mended,'" she would say when any one appealed to her; "no one can rightly under-

stand what's in another person's heart and mind. Then if you go and spread a tale against them, you may likely as not have done a world of harm, for it mightn't have been done in the way you thought it was."

As she bustled about her own house the thought of Esther returned again and again.

"Poor lass, poor lass, what a pity 'they *deserve* it!" she said. "Look at that, Trixie, boy. If we all got our deservings it would be a sore time for most of us. Dearie me, lad: there's always some of us ready to put the merciful God right, seems to me, and tell Him what other people deserve. What a *blessed* thing it is for us that He can see outside of it all. Are you ready, Trixie, to mend the sails? Come along then, mother's not going to leave you at home to break your heart," and the pair trotted off again side by side.

It was between one and two o'clock in the morning when they returned, and Mrs. Fearey's bright eyes were heavy with sleep; her head ached and her back ached still more, but she said nothing, and was up at her usual hour next morning, just about the time when the *Brown Bird* slipped down the creek, with her brown sails glowing red at the touch of the crimson sunrise.

CHAPTER VII

STEPHEN WELD COMES HOME

HE miller knew nothing of the matter. He saw the sails of *Brown Bird* sliding out between the tree-tops, appearing and disappearing as the curves of the creek revealed or hid her; and congratulated himself on having found such a punctual and energetic carrier.

"Nothing like a little new blood in a place," said Mr. Emmett, well satisfied with his own discernment. "Wonder if the daughter has gone with him this time."

Later on he asked Saunders, who was looking extremely glum, if Esther Carne had gone with her father in the ketch.

"Gone, oh yes, *she's* gone," replied the miller's man, as though this in some way militated against the girl.

"Capital girl, eh, something like a daughter?" and Mr. Emmett took in at a glance the sour jealousy in his man's expression, with amusement but no disapproval. "Every man for himself" was to his mind a good motto; while he had a distinct intention in keeping alight the rivalry and contention between the ketch-owners, as it answered his business purposes and amused him at the same time.

Later, the miller walked up to the corner of Big Field and had a good look at the cottage. He went into the garden and walked round; examined the new thatch, and even looked in at the window. Then he smiled a little to himself. "Fifty pounds melt when you take to this sort of thing," he thought, "and a year is a very short time when you owe money. Well, it's *his* look-out; he knew his risk," and Mr. Emmett left

the little homestead with a well pleased air ; it did not even occur to him to consider the pain of those who might suffer for his advantage, he would have said that was no affair of his.

As he came out of the garden-gate and descended the uneven bank steps into the road, a very tall man passed quickly in the direction of Mrs. Fearey's cottage. He made a sort of salutation as he passed, and the miller replied with "Morning, Weld, back again !" and turning in the opposite direction returned to the mill and his many duties.

Meanwhile the tall man proceeded towards the cottages round the turn of the road with long easy strides, whistling as he went, and soon came in sight of Mrs. Fearey digging potatoes for her dinner, and talking to herself and Trixie with vigorous gestures meanwhile. As the little gate swung on its rickety hinges she looked round, and dropped her fork with a cry of pleasure.

"Why, bless us, it's never you, Steve ! I wasn't looking for you yet awhile."

"Well, here I am," said the new-comer. "We had a quicker turn than usual, I fancy, but you can never tell. It's been splendid weather, and that makes a difference. Old Dave Occomore came up last night, but he found his grandson going out on some new ketch."

"Ah," said Mrs. Fearey, picking up her fork.

"Here," exclaimed Stephen, "that'll do for this time. No more potato-digging for you, Aunt Fearey, till I'm away again. By the way, I'll get this lot taken up for you before I go, and store them in the wash-house. I thought you wouldn't be looking for me, so I brought a bit of dinner along. And, look here, Aunt Fearey," he fumbled with the parcel awkwardly, "we can't eat all this before it turns, this weather, so I thought old Mary Richards could have a bit of it ; there's plenty, I fancy."

"Plenty, I should think so," said Mrs. Fearey laughing, as she weighed on her hand the six or seven pounds of meat contained in the parcel.

"Oh, and here are some more things," went on the pilot, feeling in the pockets of the coat he carried on his arm. "Tea and such-like—bacon—I couldn't bring any butter along, aunt, it's too hot."

Mrs. Fearey received a collection of blue and white grocery parcels in her apron, with approving comments. And later on several of them found their way into the little kitchen next door, as Stephen found there were more parcels than he had expected.

A cheerful sound of frizzling issued from both the little kitchens, and when the tall pilot looked in next door, bending his head considerably to do so, he found quite an atmosphere of well-being; a flush of pleasurable excitement on the worn cheeks of poor Susan Wallis, and old Mary's eyes bright with happiness over her sister's enjoyment, and relief at the lifting of the daily burden.

"What a treat, Steve, lad!" said old Susan, waving her thin hand towards the pan on the fire. "First bit of fresh meat we've seen since you were here last. How long's that?—seems weary weeks to us."

"Month; perhaps six weeks, Mrs. Wallis," said Stephen, "and I'm glad to be back. How's the world going with you and Mrs. Richards?"

"She's been very poorly," said old Mary gently. "*Very* poorly. Things have seemed to come hardly to her, more than usual; there's so little to take her mind off it. If it wasn't for your aunt I don't know how we *should* do sometimes. One day Esther Carne come in and cheered her a bit."

"Who's Esther Carne?" asked the pilot.

"Well, you wouldn't remember her grandmother. Esther Tewkesbury she was; went to school with Mary and me years ago. Then she married a

foreigner, Carne his name was, and went to live down Cornwall way. She'd a son, own nephew he was to old Tewkesbury as all the town called 'Miser Tewkesbury.'

"Oh, I seem to see," said Stephen, as old Susan paused for breath. "The old fellow died, didn't he, and the cottage went to his nephew?"

"Yes, that's it," said old Susan nodding eagerly. "Michael Carne, he's got the place, and Esther, she's his daughter."

"She bought a swarm of ours yesterday," said old Mary, as she set the plates and knives on the table. "Nice young woman she is, so fine and upstanding."

"Takes after her father, seemingly," added old Susan. "We couldn't see anything of poor Esther Tewkesbury in her, could we, Mary?"

"Well, I don't know, there *was* something. But then, you see, that was likely enough, seeing that her father was own son to Esther."

"Ah," said old Susan, "I was forgetting that, and thinking *he* was quite a foreigner."

Stephen, seeing the dinner was ready, took his leave at this moment, after suggesting that he should take Mrs. Wallis out for a little ride in the low wicker-chair that he had picked up a bargain for her two years ago; and which was kept in the wash-house carefully covered up.

"That will be a treat to her indeed, Steve," cried old Mary joyfully. "I doubt too she'll get a good night's rest afterwards. You'd like it, Susan?"

"I would indeed," said the invalid, smiling wanly. "And after this strengthening bit of dinner I shall feel the benefit too."

So Stephen stooped his tall head again and went out, greeted by Trixie who was waiting for him outside with extravagant signs of friendship.

"And what have you been doing with yourself,

aunt?" said the pilot, as the two, or rather the three, sat enjoying their dinner.

"Oh, all sorts," said Mrs. Fearey cheerfully. "A bit of this, and a bit of that."

"A bit too much, eh?" said Stephen. "You look pale and fagged."

"Oh, *that's* nothing," answered his aunt; "I had a job on last night that kept me up till past one o'clock. That's apt to make the eyes a bit heavy."

"What were you doing?" asked Stephen. "Must have been something uncommon, eh, to keep you out of bed after nine?"

"It was a bit of sail-mending up at Carne's," said Mrs. Fearey, smiling thoughtfully to herself as the memory of last night returned.

"Oh, Carne's. That's the new people."

"What do you know about the new people?" asked his aunt surprised.

Stephen nodded towards the next-door house. "They were speaking about the girl and her father."

"So's everybody, more's the pity," said Mrs. Fearey. "I thought perhaps you'd heard about them in the village when you said that."

Stephen shook his head.

"I came straight," he said, "walked over the downs and along through the village without seeing any one to speak to but the miller."

"Where was he?" asked Mrs. Fearey; "down by the mill-yard?"

"No, he was up here in Miser Tewkesbury's garden."

"In—Miser—Tewkesbury's—garden!" echoed his aunt, opening her black eyes. "Why, whatever was he doing there?"

Stephen laughed. "How should I know?" he said, amused at the old woman's excitement. "As I came round the turn I could see him staring at the cottage,

and in at the window. Then he came down the path and met me as I passed the gate."

"Did he say anything?" asked Mrs. Fearey in a mysterious tone.

"He said 'good-morning,' I think," said the pilot. "He looked uncommonly comfortable and prosperous."

"Ah," said Mrs. Fearey thoughtfully; and she sat absently staring at her plate, when her keen mind jumped to a sudden conclusion about the reason for the miller's interest in Carne's cottage.

"God forbid!" she exclaimed suddenly.

Stephen looked at her surprised.

"God forbid!" she said again. "For he's a hard man, and his grip is like a steel-trap."

"What are you talking about, aunt?" said the pilot, looking at her with his direct clear eyes.

"Nothing lad, nothing," said little Mrs. Fearey. "I talk so much to myself and Trixie here, I forget sometimes; don't you take any notice of me."

"Tell me about these Carnes, aunt," said Stephen, as he lighted his pipe and sat back comfortably in the windsor chair.

And Mrs. Fearey told the little story of Esther and her father; their arrival, and the part the boat took in the business of the mill. She also mentioned the jealousy in the village, though without giving names; and the climax reached in the damage done to the sails of the stranger barge.

Stephen whistled. "What a dirty trick!" he said.

"They were set on going out just the same," went on Mrs. Fearey, laughing a little at the recollection.

"Just so," said the pilot, and his square jaw seemed to set a little more square.

"So we sat up and mended the sails," concluded Mrs. Fearey.

"And the boat went?" asked Stephen.

"Oh yes, she went right enough, trust Esther and Michael for that," said the little woman.

"I'm glad of that," said Stephen quietly, "I'd have done it myself." Then after a moment's pause he said, "Is that all the hands they have aboard?"

"Young Dave Occomore," said Mrs. Fearey, gathering the plates.

"I know he goes; I mean is this man Carne alone with young Dave?"

"And the girl, yes," answered Mrs. Fearey.

The tall pilot smoked thoughtfully. Presently he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and went to fetch the chair for Susan Wallis. The ride proved a great success, the invalid returning with a faint colour, and a happy light in her sad eyes.

"We been most all the way up the down, and over the shoulder where I could look right over to the Heads," she said quite gaily. "I could see ever so far, miles of sea,—and the air, why it's like wine."

"Arn't you tired, Steve?" asked old Mary anxiously.

"Tired," said the big pilot, amused. "Here, Mrs. Wallis, now don't you go trying to walk;" and lifting the old woman gently he carried her to her chair, and set her down in her place by the fire.

"God bless you, Steve!" she said, looking up. "You've given me a treat to think of."

"You must let me take you out a bit most days while the weather holds, Mrs. Wallis," said the pilot. "Now you have your cup of tea, and you won't know yourself."

Stephen Weld hurried away to avoid thanks, and a few minutes after was wheeling a barrow-load of freshly-dug potatoes round the cottage to the wash-house, whistling contentedly with Trixie in close attendance.

Day after day the weather held, and Susan Wallis enjoyed many rides to the downs, to the cliffs along

the sheltered road to see the cornfields stacked with rich brown sheaves ready for carrying; and the fretful lines were smoothed around her drawn lips. Often she slept out of doors, resting against the pillow old Mary arranged for her comfort; slept, with the sea-wind fanning her face, and the cry of the gulls echoing from rock to rock below.

The potatoes were dug and stored, onions were also dug up and drying on newspapers in the hot sun at the back of the cottages.

"You leave us nothing to do, Steve," said Mrs. Fearey, regarding her store with satisfaction. "Baby and me shall grow too fat and lazy."

The pilot laughed. "You'll never grow lazy, Aunt Fearey, your spirit wouldn't let you."

Towards the end of the week he found himself almost unconsciously sauntering down to the mill-wharf in the evening with something of expectation in his mind. Almost every day there had been some mention of the Carnes; he had looked curiously at the pretty little house, and accompanied his aunt in her visit to the bees, who seemed to have made up their minds to patronize their new domain, and give no unnecessary trouble to any one.

Stephen did not patronize the public-house, commonly known as The Corner; he was too wholesome a man for excess of any kind; but he met Durlmouth men on the "slips" and the building-yard, at the mill-quay, and by the bridge, and listened without comment when remarks were dropped about the strange ketch and her owners. A man of few words himself at all times, he did not encourage confidences unless they were to other people's advantage.

Somehow or other no man ever came and spoke evil of, or devised mischief against, a neighbour to Stephen Weld. He had a quiet way of looking at slanderers that silenced evil-speaking. The clearness

and power in his direct glance seemed to blight tale-bearing, and make the speaker feel small and contemptible. His presence carried a dignity of its own too; for his height and strength were unusual, his character unblemished, and his word trusted.

"*Brown Bird* ought to be up Creek to-night with the miller's corn," said one to another. "There's a fair wind. Top of the flood about six o'clock."

"Pity she don't sink off the Durl Head," said another. "She wouldn't be missed in Durlmouth."

There was a rough laugh round the circle, which died out as Stephen Weld looked quietly at the speaker.

He made no comment, but walked away, and the group he left behind felt uneasy.

The interest of the pilot had been aroused in the new-comers to an unusual extent, and therefore when the ketch ran in before the wind with her peak lowered, and the afterglow warming her brown sails to a deep red, Stephen was leaning against a buttress of the bridge, waiting. The ketch was well handled, and slipped up to the quay with easy upright motion. A young lad was pulling the jib and foresail down, a tall active man stood by to throw the loop over one of the upright posts, and a girl stood at the helm in an easy attitude one hand on her hip, with the warm light shining full on her sun-touched skin and deep eyes.

"All right," called the man as the loop landed over the post. There was a little shiver and creak of planks, the swinging peak struck idly against the uneasy sail, and the boat came to a standstill without shock, for she had no weigh on her, so nicely was the distance calculated. Stephen gave a little murmur of approval to himself; he was watching the girl, who had picked up her hat from the deck, and was smoothing back her hair preparatory to putting it on. Then she

stretched herself and laughed. "Oh, I'm so stiff, dad, I'll go home and get tea; come as soon as you've cleared up. There won't be any unloading to-night?"

"No, not to-night, my girl," said Michael, who was in a good temper over the prosperous journey.

"All right then," and Esther jumped ashore ignoring any assistance, and calling out "Good-night, Dave; don't be long, dad," stepped quickly across the quay.

There were one or two onlookers, besides the usual parties of children that haunted the shore and quays after school and tea; but Esther passed through them without a glance. Her attitude of indifference was obviously a little artificial to a keen observer, because it was overdone. She was so young, and she wanted to show she did not care. She mounted the slope quickly towards the bridge, and in her haste almost ran against Stephen; he moved quickly with a murmur of "Pardon, miss," and Esther, perhaps a little startled at the civil tone, turned her head as she gained the road to look back. The stranger was looking after her, and their eyes met. Esther drew herself up and hurried on, vexed at having even appeared to take a moment's interest in a Durlmouth person; but though she held her head high, and hastened her steps, the eyes she had met in that one backward look dwelt in her mind. Where had she seen that fearless, direct gaze? Where had she seen that strong, square jaw, and firmly-set, gentle mouth? It was all quite familiar, and yet, she thought, "I couldn't have met him in Durlmouth."

As she opened the garden-gate, her eyes wandered to the bees, or rather to their home, for the bees themselves were all asleep; the train of thought fired her memory.

"I know," she exclaimed aloud, with a little gesture

of her quick hands; "I know; of *course*, it was Stephen Weld the pilot." Then after a pause she said, with a little smile, "And he's *exactly* like his photograph."

As she lighted a little fire, and set on the kettle, her mind kept recurring to the new face, much to her real annoyance. She set the table for tea and supper combined, and found herself standing at the open door leaning her head on the woodwork, and humming softly to herself as she stared out into the dusk, still thinking.

Voices in the road and heavy feet disturbed her. People were approaching the gate; it opened, and some one entered, apparently more than one person, and yet Esther could not see them separately. She made a step forward, and said quickly—

"Who is it? Is it you, father?"

"All right, my girl," came back Carne's voice, but with a slight effort in it, as speaking in pain. Esther sprang forward and met her father, half carried, wholly supported, by a very tall man.

"What is it?" she said, with a quiver in her voice.

"Don't you worry yourself, miss; your father slipped on the plank carrying a sack, and he's sprained his ankle, or given it a twist." The voice that spoke was deep and rather slow of utterance.

Esther looked up at the man's face as he half lifted Carne over the threshold and helped him to a chair, and saw again that it was Stephen Weld.

Michael was evidently in great pain; his face drawn and colourless.

Esther fetched the little flask of whisky kept in the sideboard in case of illness and handed him some without a word. After a minute he moved uneasily and then looked up at the pilot, who was standing against the side of the fire-place.

"I'm much obliged to you for your help," said

Carne. "It would have taken me half the night to get home, I expect, but for you."

"I was just passing along on my way to my Aunt Fearey's," said Weld. "I'd seen your boat come in earlier."

Esther looked up and caught his eyes fixed on her, and in spite of herself and to her own annoyance she blushed.

"I thought there was to be no unloading to-night, father," she said rather hastily, perhaps to hide a little confusion.

"I thought there wouldn't be," Carne spoke faintly. "But the miller was set on having some of it in; so I was carrying a sack, and somehow I slipped, or the plank slipped. It would have been all right if I hadn't tried to save the sack, it was on my shoulders, and I thought it would be in the water next minute. I suppose that was what did it; I got a wrench."

"When I found him he was pretty near crawling," said Stephen; "getting over the ground somehow."

"I suppose none of them offered to help you, father, I mean down there at the mill?" said Esther fiercely.

"Oh *they*, no. Besides I wouldn't have taken their help, anyway."

The pilot looked quietly from father to daughter, and Esther dropped her eyes with a faint sense of vexation as she met the direct surprise of the look.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Carne? Shall I carry you up to bed?"

"Oh no, thank you all the same. I'll be all right. Esther will bathe it, and tie it up, and like enough I shall be pretty right in the morning."

"Shall I fetch a doctor?" asked Stephen dubiously; he was disturbed at the sharp evidences of pain in Carne's drawn features.

"Doctor, no," the master of *Brown Bird* laughed scornfully. "I don't hold much with doctors' stuff."

Oh, you needn't worry about me ; as soon as the swelling goes down I shall be all right again."

"Well, good-night then," said Stephen, "if there's nothing I can do." At the door he paused and looked back at Esther, who made a step forward. "If there should be anything I can do, you'll let me know. I'm living up at Aunt Fearey's, next door to Mrs. Richards : you know them ?"

"Oh yes ; Mrs. Fearey has been very good to me," and Esther smiled, her own peculiar quick smile that seemed to light the whole face with a sunny flash.

"Good-night," said the pilot again, and bending his head under the door-frame he disappeared into the dusk.

Esther shut the door. And for the next hour she was busy, bathing and then bandaging the rapidly swelling foot ; then having wrapt it in oiled skin and flannel, she enticed her father to a cup of tea, though he could not eat anything.

Later on, with the help of Esther and the stair-rail, he tried to get up-stairs ; but fainted with pain. Esther was frightened though she did not show it.

"Never mind," she said cheerfully, supporting him as he came to himself with a faint sigh, "the sofa is first-rate. I'll make you a bed on the sofa by the fire. It will be much better not to try at all to go up and down for a week."

The old couch under the window was drawn up in no time. And Esther fetched bed-clothes and pillow, drew the curtains, cleared up, and made all comfortable. She helped her father to undress, and felt a sense of relief as he lay down with a sigh of exhaustion.

"Is that better, dad?" she asked anxiously, bending over him.

Carne opened his eyes and looked at the beautiful face and eyes of pity.

"Yes, my girl, yes," he said with effort, "fine and comfortable; don't you fret now: go to bed."

But Esther did not go to bed, she waited till a fitful slumber seemed to seize on her father, and then went up-stairs and lay on her bed, stealing down every little while to see how he was.

Towards morning she found him with wide-open eyes, tossing restlessly.

"Is it worse, dad?" she asked, seeing him awake when she stole in on stockinged feet.

"It's pretty bad," said Carne grimly. "But that's not what I'm worrying about, not the pain, I mean. It's how this Durlmouth set will be chuckling to think I'm laid up. Mr. Emmett promised me the run to Salterne with the flour, and Haynes wanted the job too."

"Haynes shan't have the job," said Esther quietly, bringing down her black brows in an ominous line.

"I can't help his getting it now," said Carne restlessly. "I know, as sure as paint, that this foot is a long job; and the flour must go out in a week."

"It shall go out in a week," said Esther, with calm decision.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLIGHT OF 'BROWN BIRD' AND HER MISTRESS

TO the fevered mind of Michael Carne his daughter's assurance carried conviction. He did not pause to ask how she could perform the promise! He dozed fitfully, waking to acute pain and discomfort, but saying to himself that it would be all right about the job, Esther said so.

Meanwhile, Esther herself had not made the assurance without a fixed purpose in her mind. To her, opposition and difficulties were usually an incentive. Esther, like most people, knew herself very little indeed; and did not realize the great possibilities for good and evil in her own nature. She said sometimes that she "hated to be beaten"; but she did not understand that this dislike of defeat was a sign of fierce tenacity and strength of will that at present ruled her in the absence of any greater power; and would ultimately lead her to noble development or the reverse, according to the motive power it should be moved by. Or, to put it perhaps more simply, at present she wanted things done because it was her will to do them; not because they were right, or because of any great guiding principle, for Esther had at present hardly even wakened to an active consciousness of such things. Her noble nature gave her true instincts, her sense of honour was clear—unusually so for a woman; but she had not even wakened up to a sense that renunciation and submission are the great factors for God's work in living souls.

For the next day or two she went quietly about her work, attending assiduously to her father's foot, without apparently much result for the better.

Mrs. Fearey came in early the following morning and added her advice to Stephen's that a doctor should be summoned; but Michael was obstinate. "You're making a great mistake, Mr. Carne," said Mrs. Fearey, sitting down on the edge of a chair with her small hands tightly clasped in her lap.

Michael made a gesture of impatience.

"I know my own business, ma'am, I suppose, and I don't ask to interfere with other people's."

Mrs. Fearey made no angry retort, her sympathy was too large; and her quick insight led her to see so clearly the workings of other minds.

"Ah well, we must all please ourselves," she said gaily. "For the rest, we live and learn, and nobody can teach another till the Almighty takes them in hand Himself," she added under her breath.

"If there is anything I can do tell me, my dear ; but I shan't bother you with visits while your father feels so restless. It must be a blow to him to have to give up just when he seemed to be doing so well with the miller." She spoke on the doorstep, and dropped her voice with a little gesture towards the couch.

"Oh, that will be all right," said Esther, "he shan't give up the job. *Brown Bird* will go to Salterne with the flour early next week."

"Go—to Salterne—with *that* foot." Mrs. Fearey raised her voice a little in her surprise.

Michael Carne turned his head.

"What's that?" he asked irritably.

Esther's quiet voice answered with a peculiar ring of decision, "Mrs. Fearey was surprised when I said *Brown Bird* was off to Salterne early in the week."

"Aye, aye, she's off, sure enough. We're not going to be beaten by this Durlmouth lot," and Carne turned over restlessly on his side, his dark eyes bright with a feverish light.

Mrs. Fearey wisely made no more comments, but trotted off with a cheerful good-bye ; when she got out into the road, however, she shook her head anxiously.

"Those poor dears are taking the wrong road, Trixie, boy," she said to the old dog. "Ah, dear, it's a bitter road too. Once people take to that sort of thing it hurts themselves more than anybody else. 'Love one another,' the dear Lord said, 'love your enemies, bless them that curse you.' 'Tisn't easy, is it, boy?—as you found when the yellow dog up Corner wouldn't let you be ; but you minded mother's words, and here you are." The old dog rubbed his grey nose against her

hand. "Oh dear, oh dear, if people only *would* attend to the blessed words, they'd find it so much the better for them: they can't go wrong. Fly in the face of them, and you'll meet the sting of it some day when you can't get away. Stick to them, and you'll grow to bless the day you gave up your own will."

"What's the matter, Aunt Fearey?" said a deep voice, and the little woman suddenly found her impetuous trot checked.

"Oh, nothing, dear lad, nothing. I was only just having a talk with Trixie here. We mostly have a word to say to each other when we're out."

"How is Carne's foot?" asked the pilot, as he turned and walked homewards by her side, Trixie pressing in between with stiff gait and supreme content.

"Esther says he'll be well enough to take out the ketch early in the week." Mrs. Fearey tried to speak as though she were not surprised at her own news.

"Oh," said the pilot; then after a pause, "It'll be a quick mend if he does."

"It will indeed," said the little woman, and the matter ended, for Mrs. Fearey did not believe in discussing her neighbour's affairs to any one, not even to her nearest and dearest.

The village was greatly interested in the report of Michael Carne's accident. He had been seen to slip in saving the sack, and to crawl away homewards with greatest difficulty. Certain people were indifferent, but some were jubilant. "Down Corner" it was agreed that the miller was punished for his patronage of the foreigners.

"He'll have to wait now, and serve him right," was the general opinion.

Mr. Emmett heard the report and was annoyed. He recognized an undercurrent of satisfaction in his man's demeanour.

"Go up to Tewkesbury's cottage before dinner,

Saunders, and ask if *Brown Bird* is going over on Tuesday with the flour. It's no use loading her if she can't go."

Saunders touched his cap as the miller turned into his house, and went on the errand with more alacrity than he had done before.

The door opened at once to his knock, but not wide, and Esther's tall figure stood between the miller's man and the interior of the kitchen.

"Did you want anything?" she asked, and there was a defiance in her whole manner, very different from the friendly sincere glance that had greeted him on his former visit.

"Mr. Emmett wants to know if Carne can take out *Brown Bird* on Tuesday with the flour for Salterne; because if not it's no use loading her."

"Certainly," said Esther in her hardest tones. "Please tell Mr. Emmett we shall be quite ready on Tuesday."

Saunders' countenance fell.

"I thought your father was too bad to go," he said unguardedly.

"Oh, did you," answered the girl, lowering her black brows as she looked straight at her visitor. "Well, you are mistaken, you see," and she shut the door.

"In my very face," as Saunders said to his angry wife afterwards.

"That's all right," was the miller's reply to Esther's message; he had great faith in Carne's ability to keep his word, and dismissed the question at once for other business.

The loading of the ketch proceeded; but at the same time the report gained ground that Michael Carne was very ill. He had not been seen yet. Young Dave Occomore was always on the boat, and Esther came down to speak to him now and again.

To eager inquiries he answered that Esther said *Brown Bird* was going over with the flood late on Tuesday night. He hadn't seen Carne himself; he hadn't been up to the cottage; but of course the boat couldn't go without the master. Therefore when Esther came down on Monday, just a week after her father's accident, she found the boy dubious and full of questions.

"Mr. Emmett, he's been down looking round, wanting to know if I'd seen the master."

"Don't you trouble, Dave," said Esther quietly, "the master knows what he's about."

"There's the miller, coming out of the mill now, talking to Mr. Saunders," said the boy.

"All right," said Esther, "I'll go and speak to him," and she crossed the plank and walked along the quay to meet the master of the mill.

Mr. Emmett looked at the tall, dignified figure of the girl as she approached, and guessed at once who she was.

"Are you Esther Carne?" he asked abruptly.

Esther looked at him quietly; her eyes were on a level with his, for the miller was not tall for a man.

"Yes, I am," she said.

"I'm glad to speak to you," said Mr. Emmett, instinctively taking a tone of more respect. "I hope your father is better."

"He's very well, thank you, sir," answered the girl.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear it. I was a little anxious about the flour. I could have made a shift and sent it by the wagons, but the sea journey is a good bit more direct, as you know."

Esther nodded.

"I was beginning to think we should have to unload your boat again, from what I had heard, and that would have been a serious loss of time."

"People talk a lot of nonsense," said Esther

calmly. "We shall take the boat out to-morrow night with the flood, and be at Salterne in the early morning. You needn't worry about the flour, sir."

"Oh—er, thank you," said the miller.

As the girl left him and went back to the boat to speak to David, the miller was conscious of surprise at his own feelings. He had even been nervous in the presence of this girl, daughter of a barge-owner employed by himself. And as he sauntered back to his house the memory of the fearless look of the deep brown eyes from beneath the long black brows haunted him, and he found himself saying to himself, "What a fine woman!—a mind too; plenty of pluck there. Carne's a lucky fellow to have such a daughter; she's not like ordinary girls." And the thought stayed in his mind, returning again and again that Esther Carne was not like other girls. As Esther herself walked back home she was not thinking of the miller but of the weather. All day the wind had been rising, blowing gustily from the south-west. A thought struck her, and she turned into the winding path that crawled up the steep incline to the coast-guard station that stood poised on the very summit of the point of rock forming the westward side of the horse-shoe entrance.

At the top the wind was strong, and banks of cloud were driving up from the south-west. The flag was beating out with quivering buffets, and the long ropes of the flagstaff shivered as the wind wailed through them.

Mr. Newman, the chief boatman, was looking seawards through his glass.

"It's windy," said Esther timidly, for the head of the coastguard was rather a great personage. He lowered the glass and looked at her.

"Your ketch is going out to-morrow, isn't she?"

"Yes," answered the girl, "is it going to be bad?"

"Not a regular gale, a bit of a blow, though; there's a good bit more to come. But you'll be all right enough; the wind's pretty near fair for you if it's Salterne you're going to, and round the Head it will be smooth enough too."

"Thank you," said Esther gratefully. She liked this quiet man with grey beard and deep eyes that seemed to be sunk in sockets carved sharp by the restless buffets of the storm winds.

"How is your father?" said the chief boatman, as she turned away, suddenly remembering that Michael Carne had met with an accident.

"Oh, thank you——" answered Esther; then with a slight hesitation she added, "His foot will soon be all right, we think."

"Ah," said Mr. Newman, raising his glass again and turning it on a scrap of wind-tossed sail that was leaping and staggering out of the grey sea far away down by the Black Bill. "Don't you let him use it too much at first."

Esther took one more look at the sea, and with her lips pressed together, ran down the rocky winding path, reaching the sheltered valley, breathless.

"Who would think there was such a wind up there?" she thought, looking back at the cliffs. "Dad won't know, that's one comfort."

Carne was restless and irritable; his foot was in constant pain, and quite useless. If the swelling had succumbed a little to Esther's care, the pain did not abate. She could not keep him quiet entirely; though he still remained down-stairs, he made shift to drag himself here and there with the help of a stick and furniture, only to lie down again with groans of pain.

To-night he was unusually restless and anxious, following Esther with eyes deeply sunk by wakeful nights, and muttering to himself in worried tones every now and then—

"I don't half like it."

"Look here, dad," said Esther gaily, "I won't have you worry one bit more. Now I'm going to bathe your foot, and you really must rest; remember it will be much more difficult if you are ill, and you know you don't mean to give it up; I wouldn't, even if you would."

Tuesday morning found Esther cleaning early. Every corner was swept out and scrubbed, and all things necessary for use brought into the front-room and carefully arranged to be handy. A box was filled with coal and set near the hearth, with little sticks broken for kindling. The kettle was filled, the water-can and a large jug from up-stairs set in the corner ready, filled with water. Food enough for several days was put in the front-room cupboard. Bacon for rashers, eggs and butter, bread and tea.

"I can't think of anything else," said Esther, standing still to look round after her exertions. Her eyes were bright, and there was a feverish spot on each cheek.

Carne lay still, watching her.

"Isn't the wind rising?" he asked uneasily.

"An August blow," said Esther calmly. "You musn't look at the sky, dad; it's going to rain, that's nothing." She was too busy and excited to think of Mrs. Fearey, and was really glad that the little woman did not pay them a visit, or send Stephen, as it would not have suited her purpose to ask any one in; yet as the afternoon waned her heart misgave her, and she knelt down by the sofa and looked anxiously in her father's face.

"Dad, are you *sure* you'll be all right?"

"What's to hinder?" said Carne. "I'm all right, my girl, it's you I'm thinking of."

"Shall I go and ask Mrs. Fearey to come and look after you?" went on Esther restlessly.

Carne shook his head positively.

"Dear, no; what good would she be? I hate a strange woman meddling about my place."

"Remember, dad, I shall send you a telegram; it will cost something, all the way from Durlstone, that's the nearest. I believe it's half-a-crown; shall you mind?"

"Shall I mind," said Michael impatiently. Then he suddenly drew the lovely face, bent towards him, nearer with both his hands, and kissed the broad forehead tenderly.

"I doubt I'm mad to let you do it, Esther," he said, and the girl saw the shine of tears in his sad eyes.

"Dad, dad," she cried coaxingly, "you wouldn't think anything about it if you were well. It's just staying in and getting no sleep that seems to make you see things in a dark light. Now just *think* how often I've done as much. It's spring tides—all in our favour, for the wind's so fair that I can get out before the flood. There'll be a splendid moon."

"You'll never see the moon with the clouds driving up like this."

"I *shall*," said Esther. "Clouds blow over; it's only gusty; we've got the mainsail reefed; we shall fly down. And, after all, what's the distance; a mile or two only just round Durl Head and we shall be in a mill-pond."

Carne sighed.

Presently he said, "Take some brandy or whisky, my girl, with you; mayn't want it, but you may. Steering free is heavy work when the sea's rising, especially after an hour or two."

"All right, I'll fill the little flask," said Esther, "but I shan't want it."

There was silence as the girl searched for the little flask, and filled it, packing it afterwards with one or two necessaries in a small fish-basket.

Supper was a very dismal meal, in spite of Esther's lively talk and persistent gaiety.

She had allowed it to be generally reported that the *Brown Bird* would start at ten o'clock, the very turn of the high spring tide. Outside, it was true, the tide would be against them for an eastward journey, for a time. But that difficulty would be equalized by a strong wind in her favour; and they had calculated that the sweep of the tide in the great bay between Black Rock Bill and Durl Head would only have the effect of keeping *Brown Bird* well out to sea, and thus minimizing the danger of the wind blowing straight on shore. Esther had argued it all from most favourable points of view.

"By the time she rounds Durl Head, you see, we shall begin to get the flood again outside, and that will carry her right up finely, and take us into Salterne on the top of the tide there, just what we want, dad." She was very convincing in her arguments, her bright eyes were so reassuring, and her smile so gay, that even Carne's worn face relaxed and the bitter lines round his mouth melted into something like a smile.

At half-past eight the dusk had fallen. There had been little sun all day, and sunset seemed to have taken place an hour earlier from the light, or want of light.

"I want to slip out about nine, dad," said Esther, coming up to the couch and arranging the coverlet and pillow; her hands trembled a little.

"Yes, my girl, yes. I mustn't keep you." He raised himself on one arm and threw the other round her; he was breathing quickly.

"Dad, have you got everything you can think of?" as Michael dropped back on the pillow turning his face slightly away. Esther looked at him a moment, and then went quickly out of the room, shutting the door carefully, but not locking it outside.

A minute passed in absolute stillness, only broken by the busy ticking of Esther's little alarm clock.

Then the door opened gently and Esther's voice said, full of gaiety and assurance—

"It's splendid out, dad; the wind is not a bit too strong, only just what we want. Good-night, dear dad; look for the telegram in the morning," and she was gone again.

Carne had started up as he heard her voice, but before he could speak she was gone, and he lay back comforted.

Esther ran down the path, and shut the gate behind her, careful to latch it against the buffets of the wind. Even down there, in the valley, the gusts shook the little gates, and bent the fruit-trees in the gardens. A wet sleet flew in front of the storm, hardly rain, but penetrating and blinding.

"I expect it's pretty bad on the cliff," thought Esther, but her heart was not daunted. "We shall do all right; what a run it will be!" and she laughed a little.

No one was about. The evening was not tempting, and Esther passed quickly along between the hedges without meeting a soul. Down the road, turn after turn, past the twinkle of the lights in cottage windows, over the bridge and on to the quiet quay. The mill was dark and silent, locked up; but lights shone behind the neat blinds of the miller's house across the road.

Brown Bird was moored stem and stern against the piles, her mainsail up and pressing hard against the mast, while the lowered peak swung heavily every now and then as the wind played with it in boisterous fits and starts. Jib and foresail were half up, and shivered on the halliards with the pressure.

A little further down the quay another ketch was moored, a light shining from the cuddy-door into the

well, showing that some one was on board. Esther knew it was the disappointed *Queen of England*, and she laughed a little to herself as she sprang on board her own boat.

"Dave," she called out quickly ; "here, sharp as you like, cast off in the bows."

The boy, who was tidying up, sprang forward on hearing her voice, without paying much attention to the source from whom the order proceeded.

Esther cast off the stern-mooring and seized the helm at the same time ; the stern of the ketch swung out into the stream under the pressure of the mainsail.

"Quick, Dave, up with the jib and foresail ; leave the peak till we get down," Esther called above the rattle of ropes and creak of timbers, but not loudly.

Brown Bird drifted heavily down towards the other boat ; she did not obey the helm immediately, having no way on her and being forced round by the big mainsail.

Esther set her lips and watched the sails, feeling for the first sensation of life in the ketch, which she knew must come in a moment ; the only question was would it come soon enough to avert a collision, which would bring up the other ketch's crew from below and cause them to notice what the girl wished to hide.

"Hurrah ! there she comes, beauty ; there's no boat like her," murmured Esther, as she felt the hull under her feet right itself and pull against the helm. "What a shave !" and she laughed a little, gaily, with her eyes fixed on the mainsail which must not gibe at this critical moment.

The long low hull of *Brown Bird* swept down within a few inches of her rival, lower in the water because she was loaded, but clever and quick as ever now she felt the pressure of her front sails. A dark form appeared against the light, as a man came up from the cuddy of the other barge.

"Hullo!" said a voice.

"Hullo!" answered young Dave from his station forward, and in another minute *Brown Bird* plunged into darkness ahead, going steadily and full of life.

Young Dave coiled the ropes into their accustomed neat positions and then came aft to await orders.

"Hullo!" he said, seeing Esther standing at the helm. "Where's the master?"

Esther paused a moment while she bent her eyes on the dim shift of the passing darkness, then she said—"The master's at home."

Dave whistled; a whistle expressive of amazement and dismay.

"Well," said Esther calmly, "you're not afraid to go without him, are you?"

"*Afraid*," young Dave Ocomore echoed the word with the placid scorn of a British lad for any doubt on his courage. "But are you really going to take her alone, Esther?"

"With you, yes; that's just what I am going to do."

CHAPTER IX

'BROWN BIRD' FIGHTS FOR HER LIFE



WHATEVER this son and grandson of brave pilots thought, he said little to the girl's announcement. Seeing that Esther Carne, a girl but three years older than himself, was ready to make the attempt, he would have been drowned rather than express doubt. At the same time he was seaman enough to be well aware of the risk they ran, and the lively probability that neither of them would see Durlmouth again.

"Shall I get the peak up now?" he asked indifferently. "It will be heavier outside."

Esther nodded. "We can always let it down if there is too much sail on."

"There won't be that," said the boy. "She'll want all we've got, I fancy, running."

Esther nodded again; she knew quite well what he meant; the danger there would be of pooping from the following seas, low as they were in the water.

Putting the helm away Esther stayed the flight of the ketch, bringing her up in the wind to get the pressure off the mainsail as the peak went up with a succession of strong hauls. She was getting accustomed to the darkness, and beginning to realize that they were really off; her spirits rose to the occasion, and the sense of power was exhilarating.

All boats were safely housed. "No one but Michael Carne and his daughter would have troubled to go out on such a night," said the Durlmouth men when they strolled down later to see the start, and found the *Brown Bird* flown. "Girl was steering too, so far as I could see," said Haynes' hand. "But there wasn't hardly time to see, she was gone too quick."

"They'll have a nice run," said a man who had been up to the coast-guard station. "It's dirty as can be, coming up for the night, but it'll likely enough blow out by morning."

"Well, it's their business, if they choose to sink themselves and the boat to please Miller Emmett," said Haynes. "I wouldn't have gone out such a night; job or no job."

And so said every one, strolling back to cosy homes and sheltered chimney-corners, while the wind rose steadily, crying down the valley like human voices; dropping to deathly stillness only to wake into a mad bout of roars and buffets, shaking the doors,

moaning in the chimneys, and playing havoc with the tidy gardens.

Young Dave hauled in the mainsheet, as the ketch swept through the outer basin making for the great rock gateway; and as the big mainsail drew in, Esther realized the force of the wind. Sheltered as they were, even here the roar of the waves sounded ominous; and the booming of the wind in the horse-shoe of the downs made the immediate stillness under the towering height of the western cliff the more awesome.

Esther had to let the mainsail gibe for the outward plunge, and for a moment or two there was rattling and beating of ropes and sails, then with foresails neatly set and mainsail free the *Brown Bird* breasted the angry mass of water forcing into the basin; and setting her nose towards the tumbling confusion outside rushed through the cliff gateway.

Esther drew her breath as the wind caught them. The heavy ketch heeled over, and the water rushed up the gun'l. It seemed as though they would be blown down on to the eastward rocks at once for a minute; but the stout boat was not so easily beaten. She recovered herself, and the terrible leeway drift modified. Young Dave came up to Esther keeping his feet with difficulty.

"Don't trouble about *that*," he jerked his head towards the towering blackness to leeward. "The tide'll keep us off of them. She'll feel it directly."

Esther smiled and nodded bravely. Her nostrils were dilated with the spirit of battle, and her mouth set in a hard line.

Out and out they drove; turning a point and a point more off the wind, and heading away towards the far-away eastern horn of the great outside bay.

The darkness was distracting because it was so uncertain. Dense clouds covered the moon, and the

misty rain mingled with flying spray seemed to thicken the atmosphere into a wall of beating water.

Esther had on her father's oilskin coat and the sou'-wester tied down over her ears; her eyes looked out from under the peak fierce and resolute. Presently she said—

"If the moon would come out it would be a bit more cheerful, Dave."

The boy laughed grimly.

"We musn't look for cheerfulness this side the Head," he said; "but it would be a blessing if we could see something of what we're about."

Further and further out lashed the *Brown Bird*, plunging through the mad waves with a curious solid strength; so unlike the leap of a well-built yacht. The waves washed and swirled over her deck forwards, and beat on her beam with thunderous buffets.

"Keep her away a bit more now," shouted Dave; "we don't want to get too far out, and the tide's strong."

"I shall steer for the light on the Head," said Esther, "I can just see it."

For a time again there was silence. They were running free, and the motion was easier, but as Carne had prophesied, the steering was a great strain. The heavy boat swooped and leapt from side to side, under the pressure of her mainsail; a ceaseless vigilance and strength was necessary in handling the tiller. The arms of a strong man feel it; then how much more those of a girl, even though well-used to the sea? Young Dave observed this.

"Let me take her," he said, coming close to Esther's side.

She smiled at him but shook her head.

"You'll be done," said the boy.

Esther looked down at her stiff wrists, then she said—

"Hold on a minute, Dave; you can help me, but I daren't leave it," and the two young things faced the battle together, while the tiller sprang and jerked under their strong hands like a live creature trying to escape.

Half-an-hour passed and a thin streak of white light struggled through the chaos above unto the mad scene below.

"Hurrah for the old moon!" said Dave, letting go the tiller a moment to rub his stiffened hands. Esther looked round. All this time her eyes had been fixed steadily on the light, which cast out a beam that could be seen for many miles to the salvation of storm-driven ships; now, as she looked round, the full force and danger of their position broke upon her.

The farther out they drew, so much did the size of the following waves increase. In the bay the rush and tumble had been furious; but out farther, where they must go to pass the Head, black mountains seemed to shut out the horizon. The denseness of the atmosphere had before prevented her from seeing how the sea had risen, but now that the struggling moon threw a faint light on the wild scene, the difficulty of the position flashed into Esther's mind.

The *Brown Bird* was going well, but she was laden, and therefore low in the water. The reefed mainsail presented a comparatively small surface in proportion to the weight of the broad hull.

Esther glanced at Dave; he was looking back at the hungry rush of the black hills behind them with knitted brows. He met her eyes, and said—

"It's the flood running out against the wind that's knocking up this sea."

Esther nodded, she was thinking deeply; suddenly she said in a quiet matter-of-fact tone, bending towards him so that her words might not be blown away—

"If I put her up in the wind, can you let the reef out?"

Dave started back at the girl.

"You can't! Supposing she don't come round quick enough, we'll be swamped in the trough."

"She will come round," answered Esther. Her eyes were shining, and her mouth hard, she looked ten years older.

Dave shrugged his shoulders uneasily.

By a common instinct the two looked back, and in that instant they both saw that Esther's suggestion was their only chance.

A wall of black water was racing up on their track, the broken edge silhouetted against the lesser blackness of the night; the piles of wind-driven cloud racing above parted again, and a watery streak of light fell on the enemy pursuing.

"Hold on!" cried Dave in a suppressed voice, clutching at the girl's arm; it seemed impossible that the low stern could survive the breaking of the black wall that seemed to overhang it.

Brown Bird shivered and struggled as the water struck her. Had the wave fallen as it appeared to be going to fall, the struggle would have ended out there in the dreary wilderness of furious elements; but, after the manner of waves following, much of it seemed to sweep under and round the stern, and this saved them.

Esther gasped as the drenching water struck her, pouring along the deck and nearly carrying her off her feet. Dave shook himself like a big dog, and growled a low exclamation.

"We *must* do it," said Esther.

"Will the mast stand it?" asked Dave, looking up at the big spar that creaked and cried under the strain.

"Oh yes? Besides we can't help it if it doesn't," and Esther smiled a little grim smile. "Now then, Dave, stand by to haul on the mainsheet, and then

pull the foresail over. Don't let's think about it; the quicker it's done the better; there's not quite such a sea now for a minute, that was the seventh wave."

Setting her teeth, she forced the helm hard down; and for one moment or two the issue was uncertain. Was the reefed mainsail sufficient motive power to force round the heavy boat?

Dave hauled in the sheet steadily, and *Brown Bird* swooped round on her course; then for a minute nearly she lay over, gun'l under, while Esther kept her feet only by a miracle, and heaving water seemed to shut out the sky and turn the world into a succession of shifting mountains ready to swallow them or batter them out of existence.

Esther did not part in that supreme moment of danger; she ground her strong teeth together, and summoned all the strength of her powerful frame.

And *Brown Bird* did not fail her mistress. One moment it seemed as though she would let herself go and drift unanswering to the helm; and then, righting with a bound, she swept up in the eye of the wind, and shaking off the weight of water faced her enemy with level deck, but every sail and rope tearing at its holdings in a babel of uproar that seemed to overpower even the roar of the wind.

In a moment Dave had the mainsheet firmly fastened, and the jib and foresail drawn taut opposite ways; then he came back to Esther,—she was lashing the helm.

"I'll leave this, and help you," she said. Her voice trembled, and Dave saw that her face was quite colourless, while two tears rolled slowly over her cheeks before she had time to brush them away. There were no more tears; she was not crying, and answered the boy's questioning look with her own sudden smile; but it gave him a quick insight into

the tension of responsibility that had pressed on her in those few minutes.

Dangerous as their position was, there was a relief in facing the pursuing battalions of angry waves, and seeing them race along their sides, while the sharp bows rose at their buffets, and the long hull rode steadily.

Together the boy and girl unfastened the reefs and shook them out.

"Let it alone," said Dave; "you'll knock your fingers to pieces, Esther; the sail is none too pleasant to handle after this soaking."

"My fingers arn't like a fine lady's," said Esther, laughing, as she clutched the restless, pitching boom. "I wish this thing would stand still half a second."

"Can't very well expect that," said Dave, who was of a matter-of-fact disposition. "We must look alive over this job, the tide's carrying us out."

"I'll lend a hand hauling it up," said Esther, as the lashings near the mast were loosed. "It will be too heavy for one."

A critical moment was at hand, as they both knew, and Esther watched the sea and waited for even a pause in the wind, or lessening in the fury of the waves.

It seemed to come, and she gave the word to David. Over came the foresail. *Brown Bird* swayed over from the wind and heeled away to leeward. Then as Esther kept her helm away, the wind filled the now full-sized mainsail, and the whole boat groaned and strained, while the mast seemed to bend over with the weight of its burden.

A minute of acute anxiety, and then the pace quickened. Another minute, and the ketch was racing away towards the light ahead, with long, living bounds and swoops, seeming almost to tear over the surface of the angry sea, instead of through it.

"That's better," said Esther, looking behind with relief.

"All the same, I thought the mast was coming out of her a minute ago," answered Dave calmly, "and we're not out of it yet. There's the race to get through."

Neither could hold the helm alone now; the four hands were needed to cope with the wild springs and leaps of *Brown Bird*, who seemed alive and mad, under the pressure of her sail.

For more than half-an-hour neither spoke.

Then Dave said, "What's the time, d'you think?"

"Oh," said Esther, with a stiffened stretch of her cramped body. "Time; it seems years of noise and black water, of thumps, and bangs, and rushes. I feel as if I were in a horrible nightmare."

Dave looked at her critically.

"You're getting a bit done," he said.

Esther shook her head, but her lips quivered, and she said nothing.

Dave considered a moment, standing squarely on his feet and staring ahead at the light, which seemed to be comparatively close now.

"Have you got a drop of spirits on board?" he said presently.

"Yes, a little flask in the basket," said Esther. "Why?"

"Because if you could hold on a minute I'll get it for you."

"I hate spirits," said Esther.

"So do I," said David. "I've seen enough to know they do more harm than good most days, but you've got to take some now. You're cold, stone cold," and he laid a hand on hers which were blue and icy.

"I can hold on alone," and Esther looked at her hands to see if they were still gripping the helm; she

seemed to have lost her sense of touch, and the noise around was duller and more distant.

Dave was gone but a minute, when he returned with the flask, and pouring some liquid into the cup, held it out to her, grasping the helm to allow her to let go.

She drank it obediently, vaguely conscious that it was very strong and burning, and that Dave was watching her anxiously; then she handed back the little cup to him, and seized the helm again, looking down at her hands.

For five minutes the two held on together, then Esther said—

"Thank you ever so much, Dave; I'm waking up again. I do believe I was nearly asleep."

"We can't afford a nap yet awhile," answered the boy lightly. "Hold on a bit longer, and we'll sleep in Salterne. We'll be in the race in a few minutes. You'd better take the rest of it; you only had a little drop."

Esther laughed quite gaily.

"No, really, Dave, I'm all right again. If I took any more I should over-do it. Do you think the sea is going down?"

The boy looked round doubtfully.

"When the tide turns it won't be so bad; it's the wind against the tide that kicked up this smother. My word, Esther, hold on, we've got into the race."

The last exclamation was caused by *Brown Bird* suddenly pointing her bows towards the racing tumble of clouds above, and springing up with a wild lurch.

Dave and Esther held on grimly to the helm, which seemed to wrench itself away from them, while the boat, as though balked in her desire, rushed to the opposite extreme and buried her bows in the churning water, while the stern seemed raised high in the air.

There was no time to speak, even had there been breath left in them.

The great light from the Head shone over the wild tumble of waters. They could see the black cliffs rising on the left hand, embedded in a seething boil of white foam, that swirled and leapt, falling on the granite rock with a never-ceasing roar, and being hurled up again and again by the force of its own impact, to an immense height, in showers of spray.

A long spur of rocks ran out seawards above the water, and, further out, below the water, which was more dangerous still. Over these the water rushed, a seething cauldron of resistless power. Of course, no ship drawing any depth of water could have been in their position without immediate destruction, but *Brown Bird*, like the rest of her kind, was built for coasting and shallow creeks; her broad hull required but a few feet of water, so that she sped on her way where a deeper vessel would have been smashed to matchwood.

The change in the motion was a trying one for her crew. The waves, instead of following on each other's heels with a succession of rollers from the westward, appeared now to remain in the same place, tossing their crests wildly skywards and falling again upon themselves. There was no method in their fury; they leapt and sprang on every side, flinging up spray as high as the mast-head, which fell back either on the deck or into the water with a ceaseless, rushing sound.

Under the white glare of the Head light the water looked like ink, and everywhere pools of foam floated on the opaque blackness of its surface.

"I hate a race," said Dave. The works were jerked out of him.

Esther laughed; there was a faint tinge of colour in her cheeks, and a daring light in her eyes.

"What can you expect to-night, with half a gale blowing across a spring tide ; we must be thankful if we come out of it with legs and arms on our bodies. Hallo, Dave, look out there ; doesn't she look fine ?"

The boy looked away over the beam where Esther pointed, and saw a noble sight. A four-masted barque tearing up from the open sea before the gale, her square sails set, and every rope pulling ; she was going like a race-horse, and passed across the arc made by the light like a phantom ship in a story.

"Going to Salterne, d'you think ?" asked Dave, as the glistening pile of canvas was lost in the dark night.

"Perhaps to London," said Esther dreamily, "coming from away and away out there with corn or something, Dave. We think this is bad, but just imagine what those real ships go through off the Horn. I've heard things that made me shiver, though I'm not afraid of the sea."

But Dave was not imaginative.

"She'll want a pilot, coming in like that," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder who she'll get. No. XIX. isn't going out till week after next, I don't believe."

"Is No. XIX. the boat your grandfather goes on ?" asked Esther.

"Yes, grandfather and Steve Weld, and the rest of that lot. She's got a bad name has No. XIX." He paused, for *Brown Bird* was flung so violently from side to side that for a moment it seemed as though the mast must go ; there was a minute of reckless lurching and pitching, during which the two held on to anything within reach, and watched the swinging of the ponderous boom with dread. Esther gave a sigh of relief as the motion quieted down, and leaving the helm to Dave, took off the oilskin hat, and dragged her hair back from her face ; the long wet strands

were escaping and, blown across her eyes, impeded sight and sense.

"Why has No. XIX. got a bad name though, Dave?" she said, as she took the hairpins from between her teeth, where she had put them for safety, and fastened the heavy knot of hair firmly.

Dave shook his head mysteriously.

"There you are, she's got a name, and that's just why people say things. She was the old *Mary Rose* of Blankhampton, and got sunk in a gale; she was fished up and turned into a pilot-boat. Some people say she's been sold twice like that, and had another name before even she was the *Mary Rose*. She's sure to go to the bottom in the end; they always do."

Esther was aware of this superstition.

"I should think that depended a good bit on the weather, and how they sail her," she said. "I don't believe much in those sort of things."

"No more does Steve Weld," said Dave, with some relief.

"There's no sense in them," said Esther.

"Steve says if you believe in God you can't be superstitious," went on the boy.

Esther was silent. There was a pause in which they rushed on with the unvarying monotony of the pitching motion and showers of spray, then she said—

"Is Stephen Weld good?"

"Good!" exclaimed Dave enthusiastically, "I should rather think he was, a first-rater. Other chaps don't do things when he's by; he doesn't say anything, but he looks, and you feel like a fool. Grandfather says he's the best pilot on the south coast, too; he can do most anything, he's so strong besides; I wish I could be like him."

Esther looked round at the earnest solid face by her side.

"Why shouldn't you be like him?—I don't see any

reason." There was a little impatience in her tone that she could not quite understand herself. "Some people can be perfect, I suppose; it isn't very difficult when they haven't got things to make them savage, and people are not against them. You'll be a splendid pilot some day, Dave, you're a splendid sailor now, a 'first-rater';" and she laughed gaily, with a feeling of compunction at her first tone of irritation.

"Young Dave" blushed with pleasure at the praise, but found no words to express it, and they were both silent for a while.

Minutes slipped by. *Brown Bird* ploughed her way more steadily onward, and the bounds of her driven hull were modified into a more even rush.

Esther closed her eyes; the lids ached with the hours of strain and the pain of the beating spray. Opening them again the scene seemed more grey, and the outline of the long stretch of cliffs they were skirting was visible in a faint luminous haze. *Brown Bird* seemed to stretch herself out for an easier motion, the jerks ceased, and the steady pull of the big mainsail kept up an even strain. A long line of white foam trailed from the cutting bows, that no longer rose violently and dashed down again in uneasy effort.

A sense of sleep was almost overpowering. Esther rubbed her eyes and looked at David. He stood square and solid as ever, wide-open eyes staring ahead, but he started when she spoke to him.

"Dave, do you see, the day's coming? I was nearly asleep."

The boy looked round. Away on all sides the dim luminous greyness was spreading. Behind, the outline of the Durl Head, full in the path of the advancing dawn, was touched with white on all its rocky ridges, where the gulls, clustering in hundreds, shone in the wet mist.

"My word, Esther, we've done it," he exclaimed. "Just look, the tide's turned, it's with us strong; the wind's gone down too, it mostly does at the turn of the tide. And now here's the day coming."

Esther let go the helm and stretched her long arms with a little shriek of triumph.

"Hurrah, Dave, we've done it. Now I'll go down and make some splendid coffee; we've nothing to do but just run up quietly into Salterne; we'll be there about seven o'clock."

"Oh, before that," said David, stretching and yawning loudly, with a glorious sense of anxiety lifted.

"With this tide and the wind, too, we shall make a spanking run of it."

About the time that *Brown Bird* slipped up Salterne river with a flood tide and a fair wind, running lazily on an even keel, while her crew, with revived strength and enjoyment of life, looked ahead for mooring ground, a weary figure crept from the window of old Tewkesbury's cottage, and holding by the furniture, made his way back to the tumbled couch, and almost fell into it in utter exhaustion. What Michael Carne had suffered during that long terrible night it would not be possible to write. Sleepless and tossing, he had been drawn to the window by the dash of the rain and the shaking of the leaden panes; and once there he sat, rocking to and fro, torn to pieces by mental and physical agony, staring out at the wild sky. As the wind rose he followed the course of his boat, and foresaw every danger and difficulty that would arise with the added torture of hopeless helplessness. He muttered and cried to himself as the gusts shook the cottage, tears of agony gathered in his eyes and remained without falling, while the long hours painted dark lines on his drawn face. He lost count of time, and the candle burned out; only

the little fire, carefully banked up by Esther, cast a faint glow over the floor and legs of the chairs.

The faint grey luminous haze, that had wrapt the *Brown Bird* after her long hours of struggle, peeped later into the cottage and touched the haggard face leaning against the wall by the window. To Michael also it came as a sort of surprise; he raised himself with difficulty and opened the window, his shaking hand almost refusing the effort.

The sky was lighting all round; the wind had dropped; in the valley it seemed quite silent, while the dull distant roar of the waves that had battered at the gates of Durlmouth Cove all night, seemed to be sinking to a sleepy hum. Then Michael Carne had raised himself and crawled to the couch like a man in a dream.

"She's safe now," he whispered, "if—she lived through the night."

And unconsciousness mercifully wrapt him like a soft cloak.

CHAPTER X

SMOKE FROM A CHIMNEY



STEPHEN WELD was in the habit of getting up very early. That Wednesday morning was no exception to the rule, and five o'clock found him working in Mrs. Fearey's garden. There was not much left to be done, and half-an-hour afterwards he strolled off down the road to the village to see what damage the storm had done.

The morning was lovely, but traces of the fierce game played by the wind all night were visible every-

where, in broken fruit trees and bending hedges, while not a few fences had sustained injury, and creepers were hanging in long pennons where they had been torn from their hold on thatch and chimney.

Stephen walked on looking about till he came opposite old Tewkesbury's cottage, then he stood still, startled by something that drew his attention. From the chimney drifted a thin line of smoke. How could that be if the Carnes were gone, they surely would not have left a fire?

It occurred to him that it was probable they had started, and finding the weather too heavy outside had returned later, at least into the outer basin, waiting for better prospects. Reasoning the matter in his mind, with a good deal more interest than was his habit over the affairs of neighbours, he hastened his steps towards the village, arriving at the quay only to see that *Brown Bird* was not there, and to hear that she had gone out earlier than had been expected the night before.

Without making any comment, except the usual ones about the weather, Steve made his way back home. There was the smoke still curling gently out of the chimney, and drifting away towards the north-east in little light scraps of cloud against the morning sky.

"Aunt," he said, as he entered the kitchen, "what do you make of this? there's smoke coming out of the chimney of the Carnes' place."

Mrs. Fearey was pottering about on her clogs, and the kitchen shone with cleanliness. She was untying her "coarse" apron as her nephew entered, holding the clean one in her teeth as she did so, therefore she did not answer at once, first folding up the working garment, then, when her mouth was free and her busy hands tying on the neat breakfast apron, she said—

"Smoke, lad, you said; well, and why not smoke?"

"They'd hardly leave a fire in an empty house," and Steve looked at her questioningly.

Mrs. Fearey drew in her breath and pursed her lips.

"Dearie me, I was forgetting; well, that's odd, surely," and she paused, considering deeply.

"Do you mind going down there, aunt, just to see if all's right? it's a shame to ask you when you're busy with breakfast." In spite of himself the pilot felt a flush overspread his face; it was especially annoying because he was, and wished to appear, indifferent; yet he could not shake off the feeling of self-consciousness that made him avoid his aunt's eye as he stooped to pat Trixie's willing head.

"Of course I'll go, it won't take me a minute," the little woman did not appear to notice any embarrassment in her nephew's manner. "Come on, Trixie, boy, the trot will do you good;" and the two hurried down the path and out of the gate, the old dog stiff with morning rheumatism and keeping up with difficulty.

"Mother's going too fast for you, is she? but there, it's cruel only to be kind," said Mrs. Fearey; "if she was to let you lie all day by the fire, you'd be a marble dog in no time, and never see the outside of your own home again. *I* know well enough what that front leg feels like; there's nothing new about it you can tell *me*; but we mustn't give in to it. There's some things must be humoured, and some wants driving; and the rheumatics are the sort that wants driving; but there, *I* know what it is," and the little woman stopped and stooping over the old sheep-dog, gently lifted the cramped front foot on to her knee, and rubbed it tenderly with her small hard hands.

The old dog stifled a faint whine between his lips as her hands passed over the joint; but his tufty tail

wagged eagerly, and his loving eyes watched the sharp face bent down to him, as only dogs can watch.

"It's the rain that's done it, Trixie, boy," said Mrs. Fearey soothingly, "the bad weather last night; a drop of mother's stuff on a bit of flannel is what you shall have as soon as we get home, and a bit of patience will do the rest. And as for complaints, we shan't hear any from you. There, can you come on a little farther?"

The old dog gave a sharp bark in response to the invitation, and jumped a little on three legs to show how much better the fourth was, out of compliment.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Fearey, as they proceeded on their way. "And you're not the only person that pretends there's nothing the matter. There's Steve now, thinks his old aunt hasn't learned to see a haystack in her sixty years of life! Ah, well, the girl's a fine creature, and love would teach her a deal."

They reached the gate and Mrs. Fearey looked at the smoke eagerly, as they passed through the little wicket. "Sure enough, sure enough," she murmured, and hurried up the path.

On approaching the house she hesitated, then after considering tapped at the door. There was no answer. She tapped again louder.

"That's funny," and the little woman backed away to look up again at the chimney, in so doing the window caught her eye, unlatched, shaking uneasily to and fro.

"It's not my habit to look in people's windows," said the pilot's widow hesitating, "but there's something amiss here," and she pulled open the frame and put her head in.

A tiny fire was smouldering down, the remains of food were on the table, a chair was upset near the window, and an inert, unconscious figure lay prone among dragging bed-clothes on the couch.

"The Almighty protect us!" exclaimed Mrs. Fearey, withdrawing her head, and addressing Trixie with trembling lips, "there's something wrong here."

Without hesitation she tried the door, and, finding it unlocked, entered, followed closely by the old dog.

Mrs. Fearey was a most courageous woman, but even she hesitated as she approached the couch and its lifeless burden; Trixie, however, was not so diffident. He pricked his ears and gave voice to an uneasy whine, then, hastening forward, sniffed at the heavy hand pendant on the trailing blanket. Then he limped to meet his hesitating mistress, and looked up in her face with confidence.

"The Lord be praised," exclaimed Mrs. Fearey, patting his head, "the dog's put my heart back again into me. I thought the man was dead, but Trixie says 'no,' and he couldn't make a mistake."

Michael Carne was not dead, but his condition was enough to dismay a stout heart. As Mrs. Fearey looked at the ashen face, she read exhaustion and collapse, and her first thought was tea and food.

She peeped into the back kitchen, and called up-stairs.

"Esther's gone, that's one sure thing," she said, as she thrust sticks into the dying sparks, "and what does it all mean, Trixie, boy?"

She did not cease in her exertions till Michael Carne, raised a little against a banked-up pillow, was taking sips of tea, and staring at her stupidly with dull eyes; even then she did not dare to ask him about his daughter, but contented herself with inducing him gradually to eat an egg and take some more tea. She saw his eyes wandering to the window again and again, and therefore presently remarked—

"It's a lovely morning, Mr. Carne."

Michael turned his eyes on her wistfully.

"It was an awful night," he said.

To this the pilot's widow made no reply, but contented herself with getting the couch straight, then she said aloud—

"I'm going home now, Mr. Carne, and what's more I'm going to send my Steve for the doctor. Whether you will or no that foot's got to be seen to, and going on like this is flying in the face of Providence. Legs and arms can't be played with no more than eyes can. I was never one to run for the doctor at every sneeze; but when a person's bones are in question it stands to reason they know more about the way we're put together than we can ourselves. You've got your daughter to consider."

At the mention of Esther, Carne's face quivered, and he turned restlessly on the couch; then, raising himself on his elbow, he said, with a sort of defiance in his tone—

"You've never said a word about Esther; where do you suppose she is?"

"I've never said a word yet, Michael Carne," replied the little woman briskly, "and reason good that I dare hardly ask myself where she is."

"She's gone to Salterne in the *Brown Bird*, with the flour, and she was out all last night," said Michael, with a sort of unflinching calmness in his voice as though he were giving himself great pain to see what it felt like.

There was silence in the cottage for a moment, then Mrs. Fearey said in a voice that trembled a little, "The Lord forgive you for letting the child go," and with that she walked straight out of the house and down the garden-path.

Through the gate and up the road she ran, or rather trotted; Trixie, much exercised in his mind at the turn of events, making stupendous efforts to keep up; so excited was she, that she ran into

Stephen before she noticed that he was waiting about in the road for her re-appearance.

"Hullo, aunt," said the big pilot, clutching the little figure, "what's the matter, nothing wrong, eh?" and there was a strain of anxiety in his deep voice.

"Oh, my dearie boy," cried Mrs. Fearey, wringing her hands distractedly, "oh, the silly, silly creatures we humans are, when we take to doing our own wills. It's nothing short of murder."

"Don't put yourself out, Aunt Fearey," said Stephen, but his face showed his keen fear of her next words.

"Oh, dear lad, who could help it," and the little woman's features were distorted in an almost comical effort to keep back a tear. "Michael Carne's in the cottage as bad as can be; and the child has taken *Brown Bird* to Salterne by herself, and if that isn't enough——" she broke off feeling for her handkerchief, while the old dog leaned heavily against her knee, rubbing his grey head against her dress, with little half-stifled whines of distress.

Stephen's face whitened under the tan. Then he said—

"Young Dave Occomore went."

"*Two* children," answered Mrs. Fearey, despairingly.

With one accord, forgetting breakfast, they turned back again towards the Carnes' cottage.

Michael was sitting up with his chin resting on his hands, his unshaved face and rough hair adding to the desolation of his neglected appearance.

"I thought you'd gone for good, ma'am," he said, with a touch of bitterness, "but your words were true enough; the Lord forgive me for letting the child go."

Mrs. Fearey threw out her hands with a little gesture of repudiation.

"Who am I to judge any one?" she said quickly.

"If any one has suffered last night it's been you, Mr. Carne; now you've got to put away all the worry out of your mind."

"That's easy to say," said Carne, almost fiercely. "How can I put the worry out of my mind?"

"You can trust in the loving Almighty God, Michael Carne," answered Mrs. Fearey, with her sharpest energy of accent. "I should have thought it would have come to you in the night how little we poor humans can do for them we love, however much we may love and sorrow; we must leave them to Him, and we must believe He does the best for them—and reason good He should," she added, changing her tone, "considering He loves them a deal more than we can."

After a minute or two of silence in which Mrs. Fearey brushed up the hearth, Carne suddenly began to tell them about the plan he and Esther had conceived, and how it had been carried out; having once broken the ice, it seemed a relief to him to discuss it all, in every detail.

"It was a pity you didn't think to tell me, Mr. Carne," said the pilot, "I'd have gone with the boat and welcome; I've nothing to do."

"It's very kind of you to say so," said the master of *Brown Bird*, "but we didn't want all the folk down here to know I hadn't gone myself, you see it gives them such a crow over us."

A slight shadow of contempt passed over the pilot's clear eyes.

"Rather a small sort of thing to risk a girl's life for, don't you think?" he said dryly.

Michael flushed hotly.

"You're right, Weld," he said gloomily. "But when we talked it over before it didn't seem to look so bad; and then Esther was so set on it—all the same, I can see now I was a madman."

Talking spasmodically the three waited for the hoped-for telegram. Michael refused to allow a doctor to be fetched till it had come ; and again and again inquired eagerly how long it would take to bring a telegram from Durlstone village, the nearest office.

"Four miles is nothing on a bicycle," he said restlessly.

"But then you never know if they're sharp with the messages," said Mrs. Fearey comforting, and the minutes flew by.

Carne pressed his visitors to eat something, and Mrs. Fearey took her cup of tea with pleasure, sharing it with Trixie, who regarded the turn of events with anything but favour, and followed his mistress' steps so closely that it was difficult to move without falling over him ; but Stephen made only a pretence of eating and drinking, watching the clock, and listening in a way that did not escape his aunt's keen eye, though Michael himself was too absorbed in his own anxiety to notice.

Suddenly there was a noise at the gate. Stephen started up, almost upsetting his chair, and met the bearer of the pink envelope at the door.

"Here you are, Mr. Carne."

Michael clutched the prize.

"The money's waiting," he said, pointing to the half-crown on the tablecloth, "it's been waiting all night ;" his hands were trembling, and he looked feebly at Mrs. Fearey. "I daren't open this thing, ma'am, now it's come."

"Why bless you, poor dear man," exclaimed Mrs. Fearey gleefully. "If the news wasn't good it couldn't have come at all ; whatever are you thinking of?"

Michael flushed and laughed nervously, there was a rustling of thin paper, and then he read with effort.

"All well, arrived safe at 6.30.—Esther."

"That's good hearing, thanks be to the Almighty," said Mrs. Fearey cheerfully, turning away to move the kettle with a delicacy that would not watch the quivering face, and tears rolling slowly down the sunken cheeks. "Now, Steve, lad, I think we'll have the doctor if you can be off to Durlstone; we might have sent a message by the lad, stupid me, my head's going."

"It's all one, aunt," said the pilot; he had recovered all his wonted composure. "I may as well go, I can explain a bit, besides it's all on the road."

"On the road to where?" asked Mrs. Fearey, pausing with the dustpan in her hand.

"To Salterne," said Stephen cheerfully. "With Mr. Carne's leave I'm going to Salterne to bring *Brown Bird* back; we can't let Es—let there be any more risk."

"What do you say to that, will it suit you?" said the little woman, turning to Michael, who lay back quietly holding the telegram.

"I'll be very grateful, and thank you kindly, Weld; thank you too, ma'am, I don't know what I'd have done without you." There was a softness in the man's eyes and voice that had not been there before.

"That's settled then, lad," and Mrs. Fearey looked up at her big nephew, with a quaint little sparkle in her bright eyes. "I shan't expect you till I see you, and mind—you take care of Esther."

It appeared that Stephen attended assiduously to his aunt's last injunction, for Esther had seldom looked so beautiful as in the hour, a few days later, when *Brown Bird* stole into the cove, lazily moving with the assistance of a soft summer air from the south-east.

The success of her daring exploit had been a great triumph to the girl; her head was high, and in her large eyes was an expression difficult to read, as though the natural sweetness of her nature struggled

to overcome the bitterness induced by recent events. As she steered the ketch up the river there was a deep flush under her soft skin, and her heart was beating quickly though her manner was indifferent.

Stephen and young Dave maintained a like stoical demeanour. The former's was natural ; simply because the pilot's simplicity of heart left him little room to trouble about the opinions and motives of others. He was so straightforward, so sincere and unsuspecting, that self-consciousness was foreign to him, and possible interpretations to be put by those less noble on his actions, did not present themselves to his mind.

Young Dave, on the contrary, was full of pride over his achievement, and his manner was a careful disguise prepared to meet a reception that he knew would contain a large element of envy and admiration ; at least among lads of his own age, with whom exploits of seamanship were tests of manhood, and gave a stamp that was a hall-mark for always.

In spite of Mrs. Fearey's reticence, the visit of the doctor had betrayed the fact that old Tewkesbury's cottage was not empty. Inquiries came to the door ; loiterers hung about the gate, but they gleaned little information, and met with no encouragement from Mrs. Fearey's brisk manner of dismissal.

The miller refused to believe the rumour at first ; but when it gathered circumstance, he came himself to the cottage, and knocked at the door, which was opened by the pilot's widow, arrayed for cleaning up, in her clogs and apron, with the hard-felt hat perched a little on one side and a handkerchief tied over the top, "to ward off the dust," as she had explained to Michael.

"Is it true that Carne's daughter went off alone to Salterne?" said the miller brusquely.

"She and young Dave Occomore, yes, that's true.

Go in, Baby, go in, my lamb, I can't have you in the wet with that foot."

"But it's very serious," exclaimed Mr. Emmett irritably. "How do I know that the boat did not founder last night, and take my flour to the bottom?"

Mrs. Fearey looked up at him with an expression difficult to define.

"Never break your heart about the flour, Mr. Emmett," she said dryly. "It's safe at Salterne."

"How do you know?" said the miller eagerly.

"Esther Carne telegraphed to her father this morning to ease his mind; they got in at half after six, safe and well."

The miller's ruffled brow cleared.

"Ah," he said, "what a quick run; good business that, eh?" He was just turning from the door when a thought appeared to strike him, and he returned.

Mrs. Fearey was closing the door, and did not trouble to show more of herself than four inches of space could reveal, though Trixie thrust his grey nose out, by her knee, to have another look at the visitor.

"How was it that Carne didn't go himself?"

"Couldn't move," replied Mrs. Fearey briskly.

Mr. Emmett made a little sound of dismay.

"What an annoying thing; I wanted to employ him months ahead. When will he be fit for work again?"

Mrs. Fearey drew in her lips, with a faint shrug of her small shoulders.

"Nuisance," said the miller, "he's the best carrier I've got," and turning away he walked down the path, looking about at the garden as he went.

Mrs. Fearey opened the door a little wider, sufficient for the passage of the felt hat, and looked after him with a curious smile on her sharp face.

"Did mother ever tell you the story of Naboth's Vineyard, Trixie, boy?" she said, as she drew in her head and latched the door. "It's not near such an

uncommon one as anybody might think. And there's the other one like it : the man with flocks and herds, and the man with the one little lamb. Ah dear, the Almighty knows His creatures' hearts, and the Bible is a wonderful book ; it takes in all a man could do, or think of, or dream of. The Blessed Lord left nothing out in His message to the poor souls He tries to win. Ah, but, Trixie, boy, the patience, the *patience* of the Almighty. If the miller looks black to a poor sinner like Emma Fearey, what must we *all* look, the best of us, to the dear Lord !”

“What were you talking about, ma'am ?” said Michael, turning his head from contemplation of the singing kettle, with a little gleam of humour in his deep-set eyes as they followed the active figure on the clogs, crowned with such strange head-gear !

“Talking, was I, Mr. Carne. Ah dear, it's a way I get into, being so much alone with the child. *He* understands me, you'd never believe the wiseness of the dog. Here, Baby, don't you follow mother round, you go and sit by the fire till it's time to go home.”

The old dog obeyed at once, sitting down by Michael, but still following his mistress with that faithful, loving eye.

“I don't know what I was *talking* about,” said Mrs. Fearey, “but I know what I was *thinking* about ; the mistake we make when we begin judging other people, it's better to leave it all to the Almighty.”

“Ah,” said Michael thoughtfully, stroking the mild grey head of the sheep-dog.

Thus it came to pass that when *Brown Bird* cast her moorings, all Durlmouth was full of interest and excitement, and speculation.

Esther paid no attention to observing idlers, but sprang ashore, and with a word to Stephen and Dave ran up the quay. She had not gone many steps when she was met by the miller.

"Glad to see you safe back," said Mr. Emmett.

"Mr. Weld came down to help us bring her back," said Esther, a little confused by the expression in the miller's prominent light eyes.

"It was a great risk, that run down."

"The flour was all safe," said Esther. "Good-night, Mr. Emmett, if you'll excuse me, I want to see father," and she ran up the bridge with long springing steps.

The miller turned, and walked slowly back to his house, thinking; and his thoughts dwelt persistently on Esther Carne.

When he reached the house door, he turned and looked back at the brown sails sliding down, as the two men housed them for the night.

"Yes," he said, almost aloud, "I'll marry that girl, she's a beautiful creature; she'll be a credit to me dressed like a lady. They may say what they like, I'll marry her," and he went in and shut the door.

CHAPTER XI

ESTHER HESITATES

THE injury to Michael Carne's foot was by no means the simple one they had at first supposed, but no less a disaster than the rupture of the tendon at the back of the heel, and the doctor held out little hope of his being able to walk for many many weeks; the harm done by neglect and wrong treatment to start with, having aggravated the mischief. Esther did not allow her father to see how dismayed she was at the verdict, but quietly set herself to make his

imprisonment as bearable as she could, by her courage and cheerfulness at home.

The worst of this state of affairs was that it increased the bitterness of both father and daughter against the village, which triumphed, as it were, in their misfortune.

Brown Bird was perforce idle, and the other boats fell into their old routine, doing the miller's work in their own time, and "hurrying no man's cattle," as Haynes said, to the constant irritation of the miller.

Esther kept herself to herself, working in the garden and taking no notice of any one, her only friends being Mrs. Fearey, who watched the state of things sorrowfully, and the two old sisters, who welcomed her presence, and realized nothing of ill-feeling and gossip.

For some days after the return from Salterne, Stephen Weld had remained at home, though finding it necessary to be a great deal at the Carnes' cottage. Esther welcomed him with sincere good-fellowship; with him she laughed and talked, asking him to come and see her father often, refusing to allow him to do her garden work, because, as she teasingly said, she was as strong as he, if not stronger, but greeting his arrivals with evident pleasure, and dropping in his presence the hard manner that she wore for the rest of the world.

"I think your nephew is the nicest man I ever met, Mrs. Fearey," she said to the pilot's widow; and the little woman looked into her unconscious face and sighed, but laughed the next moment, saying that Steve was a fine lad.

Michael Carne would not let Esther take the ketch out again, and refused Stephen's offers of help, not wishing, as he said, to be beholden to anybody. The temporary softness induced by Esther's safe voyage had given place to a return in force of all the bitterest

feelings that had possessed him before, aggravated by his failure to retain his place in the rivalry, and by the consciousness that, as long as he could not move, money was going out every day and none coming in.

He and Esther might live as sparingly as possible, but there was the doctor to pay, medicines and nourishing food ordered to be considered; and be careful as you will, such expenses mount up when they are continued week after week to a sum which one would never have calculated.

When Stephen went away for his usual turn Esther's mind was full of difficulties. So absorbed was she in the growing troubles, and the effort to keep her anxiety from Michael, that she overlooked the earnest tenderness in the pilot's eyes, and failed to note the timidity of his manner.

"Don't you go and overwork yourself, Esther," he said anxiously, lingering at the door.

"Oh, I'm all right, Steve, thank you," said the girl, smiling, though there was a little pucker of worry between her straight eyebrows; "don't you trouble about me."

"Trouble," exclaimed Stephen, almost under his breath. "Aunt has promised me that she'll look after you," he added aloud.

"I don't want any looking after," answered Esther lightly. "What are you keeping on about so, Steve?"

The pilot looked at her, and words flew to his lips, but he checked them. Love was taking possession of his great heart, of a kind only known to the noblest—love, with tender reverence; love, with unselfish patience; love, that considered only the happiness of the loved one, and waited almost with awe for a little hope, therefore he said nothing, but another good-bye, and Esther watched the tall figure stride down the path with genuine regret, and returned to the consideration of her own troubles.

"Good-bye, lad," said Mrs. Fearey; "God bless you; take all the care you can, we'd be sore hearts without you." There were tears in her bright eyes, but the sharp face was full of courage.

Stephen stooped to kiss her.

"You won't forget your promise about—Esther, aunt?" There was an eager pleading in the clear eyes.

"Now, am I likely to forget," cried the little woman with pretended indignation; "I never knew such a boy. The young ones have no patience, have they, Trixie? Wait awhile, lad, the child doesn't know she has a heart yet, but love breeds love all the world over."

"Do you really think that?" The pilot flushed.

"Wait, lad, and love her; she's a fine girl, and not a common sort to jump at every man she sees. Keep a brave heart, and your old aunt will live to see you happy. There, go along."

And Stephen went, lighter of heart, but full of thoughts of his own unworthiness and fears that he should never dare to offer anything so poor as his own heart to such a queen among women as Esther Carne.

A few days after his departure, Mr. Emmett, the miller, came to see Michael Carne. Esther opened the door, and when she saw who it was, concluded that business had brought the owner of the mill.

"Father, can you speak to Mr. Emmett?" she said, turning from the door.

And the miller entered, unwontedly gracious in his manner, but with somewhat the appearance of conferring a favour.

"I should like a few words with you alone, if you don't mind, Carne," he said.

Michael looked at him with some anxiety, his thoughts flying at once to his boat, then he glanced at Esther.

"All right, dad," said Esther, with her own air of quiet dignity. "I was just going into the garden, so it's all the same. Won't you sit down, sir?" and she set a chair for the miller.

About half-an-hour afterwards, Esther, who was banking up celery with a skilled hand, saw the miller go away. He appeared to look round as if for something or some one, but did not see the girl who was protected by a waving green wall of late artichoke as she stooped over her work.

"I wonder what he wanted," she thought, and having finished the neat bed she went in to see.

Michael was sitting up looking a little excited, a faint flush burned on his hard cheek, and his eyes greeted her with a curious expression.

"Come here, my girl, and sit down a bit," he said, dragging a chair nearer to his side; "I want to tell you something queer."

"Not bad news, dad?" and Esther stopped anxiously on her way to the wash-house.

"Bad, no; I expect most people would think it was very good," and Michael passed his hand over his forehead. Esther noted that the fingers trembled nervously.

In a few minutes she came and sat down, not on the chair, but on the hearthrug, and waited for him to speak.

Michael hesitated, then he began with a sudden tone of vexation—

"I wish your poor mother was alive, my girl, she'd know what to say to you; it's very hard on a man to lose his wife."

Esther turned her head aside and looked at the fire, sometimes her father's way of repining worried her by its uselessness and want of moral strength.

"She'd have known how to put it to you," went on Michael in a troubled tone.

"I don't think it matters for *that*, dad," said Esther gently; "I can understand you just as well as I should have understood mother. What is it you want to say to me?"

"I hardly know how to put it," went on Carne; "and yet it's simple enough. It's just this, Mr. Emmett, the miller, wants to marry you."

"Marry *me*!" exclaimed Esther, starting up on to her knees with a little gasp.

Having once broken the ice, Michael Carne went on to explain, leaning forward on his elbow and looking at his daughter's astonished face.

"It isn't a thing to sneeze at, Esther. He's a rich man, a very rich man. He's money in two banks, and house property in the best streets of Rockhampton. He owns land, and horses, and he's doing a wonderful trade. You'd be a lady; you could drive your own carriage, he'd give you anything, he seems so set on you."

He paused in the catalogue of advantages, for Esther said nothing.

"You've not set your heart on any one else, lass?" he asked rather anxiously, a sudden dismay of Stephen's attentions suggesting itself to his mind.

Esther, who had sunk quietly down again to her position on the rug as he continued to speak, and was now staring at the fire, shook her head.

"Oh no, dad, I don't think about any one but you," she added, with the faintest quiver in her voice that she could not account for herself.

"You don't dislike the man?" Michael's voice was tender as he looked at the motherless girl sitting curled up on the rug with her large eyes fixed wistfully on the fire.

"I haven't thought about him at all, to like or dislike," and Esther gave a little laugh.

There was a pause, then Michael tried again.

"It would be a wonderful slap in the face to the whole village to see you mistress of the Mill House, and set above them all. Not that I'd like to make you unhappy for a thing like that, but you can't help looking at it. The miller's a fine man, and young too, for all he's been married before. There's nothing against him."

Esther rocked herself to and fro, twisting her fingers together.

"Of course we must remember that the miller is doing us a favour, my girl. He thinks all the world of you, but he's not the sort to pick up with any girl. Looking at it fairly it's an honour, it's a great position offered you."

Esther looked at the twists of her fingers, and the corners of her mouth were a little mutinous. Somewhere in her heart rose the natural womanly thought that she was honouring any man by marrying him, and that she resented the patronage that threw the handkerchief to her, thinking a favour was being conferred.

"What did you say, dad?" she asked presently, raising her eyes.

"Well,"—Carne was a little nervous, not quite understanding his daughter's manner—"I said *I* had no objections to offer. None at all, I saw the favour done us. I said you weren't keeping company with any one else."

"Did he ask?" and Esther's eyes read her father's face, with a gleam of amusement.

"No, he didn't ask," said Carne. "He just said would I tell you he'd wish to marry you; he said it would be a great advantage to you in many ways."

Esther looked at the fire, and a little furrow appeared between her black eyebrows.

"Of course," went on Carne, "I don't want to press you. I wouldn't like you to go against your heart."

But there ; the money's going out every week. There's the debt on the house, I don't know when it will be paid, now. It will be weeks before I can do anything, and winter's coming ; it will be all we can do to live, using up the rest of the money, we shall never pay it off by August next."

"But as long as we pay the interest it won't matter, dad," said Esther rather faintly.

Michael shook his head.

"There was the stipulation that it should only be a year's mortgage. I don't say it wouldn't be renewed, but we can't count on that."

"But who could want this house?" said Esther indignantly.

Her father shook his head again.

"Business is business. You can't count on people changing their minds."

Esther realized that he was looking at the matter in a more gloomy way to accentuate the advantages of the miller's offer.

There was a pause again, then she said—

"Dad, you can't expect me to say 'yes' offhand. I can't promise to marry a man I've hardly looked at even, and never spoken to, for the sake of his money and houses."

Michael made a gesture of deprecation.

"But," went on Esther, "I don't say 'no' either. I might get to like him enough to marry him. Of course I can see it would be a good thing for both of us."

"You don't say no, then?" asked Michael eagerly.

"I might try and like him, dad, if you want me to very much ; do you want it very much, dad?" and Esther's large eyes turned wistfully towards her father's face, with a softness of tears in their dark depths.

"I can't deny, my girl," Michael hesitated a little ;

the eyes appealed to him, and stirred deeper, better feelings, but he went on, "I can't deny I'd like to see you mistress of the village, and laughing at all the Durlmouth lot."

Esther smiled.

"It would make them all feel savage," she said. Then she jumped up from the rug, and kissing her father's forehead as she went by, ran into the wash-house to fill the kettle.

He could hear her humming to herself, and when she returned her expression was lively as usual, and her tongue ran on in chatter designed to avoid the subject under recent discussion. But though Esther chattered and avoided the subject, an uneasy feeling clouded her natural high spirits; and directly she was alone the light went out of her eyes, and the lines of her face drooped. She slept but little the night after; and the following afternoon found her footsteps turning almost in spite of herself to the little cottages at the corner. She wanted in syite of her natural reserve to speak to a woman.

Mrs. Fearey's two apple-trees were bending under the weight of ripening fruit; the old pear-tree next door was making a brave show, and the mulberry against the cottage wall was a prey to busy wasps. Autumn had set her stamp on the two little gardens, and as Esther looked she thought with a faint sinking of the heart of the winter, with money difficulties and illness, and the spring with its growing dread of debt incurred.

Mrs. Fearey greeted her with delight, supported by active demonstrations from Trixie, who had of late shown a growing interest in, and affection for, Esther, not only as a friend of his mistress, but as a personal matter also.

But in five minutes the pilot's widow perceived that Esther's mind was uneasy; her bright eyes watched

the girl's efforts to be unconscious, and noted the dark circles round her eyes; however, being a wise woman, she said nothing.

Esther wandered about the room with uncertain purpose, looking at the curiosities, and finally standing for two minutes with Stephen's photograph in her hand; setting it down she said aloud, "Isn't it exactly like him, kind Steve." Then she came across the room and sat down on the hearthrug, in her favourite attitude, staring at the fire, and stroking Trixie's rough back.

"Mrs. Fearey," she began suddenly.

"Eh, my dear," answered the little woman.

"Mrs. Fearey, the miller—wants to marry me."

There was a faint exclamation in reply to this announcement, but Esther, having once broken the ice, did not pause.

"He came to dad yesterday, and said he wanted to marry me; and dad was pleased—of course he was pleased—and he wants me to——"

"And what do you want?" asked Mrs. Fearey, sitting down on the edge of a chair near, and folding her small hands in her lap.

"Well," Esther clasped her hands round her knees, and looked at the fire, frowning, "well, I don't know why I shouldn't."

"Do you love him?" Mrs. Fearey's voice was very quiet.

Esther shook her head. "No, of course not. Why I don't seem to have even looked at him hardly."

"Would you marry a man you didn't love?"

There was a little pause, then Esther said—

"I don't mind him, one way or the other, you see. Dad says he's very rich. He's got houses in Rockhampton, and money in two banks, and he pretty near owns the village."

Mrs. Fearey waved her hand impatiently.

"I don't see what all that's got to do with love."

"But it's got to do with living," said Esther, with a little hard laugh.

"If you don't live according to the Almighty's own law, you won't make much of it," replied Mrs. Fearey quietly. "It was His plan that man and wife should love each other, and be all in all to each other, 'for-saking all other,' the Book says. I never heard the Bible says we're right to marry people we 'don't mind' for the sake of houses, or money in twenty banks."

Esther moved restlessly.

"I don't see that it matters really very much," she said impatiently. "If I loved any one else it would be different. But I don't care, anyway; it isn't as if I disliked Mr. Emmett, either, I dare say he's nice enough. And then"—she laughed a little—"just think how they'd all feel in the village. Mrs. Kentfield and Mrs. Saunders, and all those horrid people. Dad would be above the whole lot. I should be mistress of the whole village. He said to dad I could have a carriage, he'd do anything for me."

Mrs. Fearey puckered up her thin lips, and looked straight in front of her. Esther looked round at her with a little laugh, but there was no smile on the sharp face.

"I don't know that a feeling of spite and revenge and getting the better of people makes it all any better," she said.

"It isn't only for that, Mrs. Fearey," said the girl, flushing. "There is lots more behind, you know, about the money, I mean. We haven't had a penny coming in of late, and you know dad won't be able to use his foot for weeks, perhaps not all winter. We never meant to use that money, but we can't help it; it's going and going, save as I will," her voice trembled, and she stopped, biting her lips, and staring

hard at the red embers that seemed to jump and dazzle before her misty eyes.

Mrs. Fearey bent forward and laid one little hard hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Trust to the Almighty," she said gently. "My dear, don't run against your own nature. You're not the sort to be happy this way, you think. Don't try and put troubles right by doing more wrong. Many a foolish man or woman thinks they're going to escape a bit of hardness by flying in the face of the dear Lord's ways. You can't do it and prosper. Esther Carne, you believe an old woman who has learned to trust her God in over sixty years of uphill life; never you try and escape trouble by doing what your own heart tells you is wrong. If His Blessing isn't on it, you'll only be storing up for yourself years of bitter regret. Your father did a wrong thing letting you go that journey to satisfy his own pride; but if he lets you go a life's journey for the same reason, the punishment will come back on him some day, and he'll live to see it was a great sin."

Esther listened, impressed but unconvinced. To a girl the reality of life is less apparent than the accessories, as a rule. The immediate advantages seemed evident; the long years to middle age with every day in intimate relation to Mr. Emmett did not appear to her in the same way.

"Well, I'm not married yet," she said, lifting her beautiful eyes to the old woman's face with a look of deprecation.

Mrs. Fearey sighed.

"My dear, you must say 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Oh, there's heaps of time," said Esther, nervously curling Trixie's shaggy coat round her fingers.

"You won't find there's ever time to hesitate in playing with hearts and lives," said the old woman sadly. "Go home, lass, and tell your father you can't

think of doing it ; not unless you love the man first, that is."

Esther got up from the rug, and, turning with a quick motion, kissed the little woman's anxious face.

"Don't you worry about me, Mrs. Fearey," she said laughing, "I'm not worth it."

"Oh, my dear, don't you say that," cried the little woman with a quick gesture ; "every soul is worth all the world in the eyes of the dear Lord. 'What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' Never forget that *He* died to save it ; once you feel that you could never say it's worth nothing."

Esther looked a little distressed ; she had spoken lightly, idly.

"Mrs. Fearey, you are very good," she said wistfully, "I wish I could be good like you."

The pilot's widow shook her head.

"When you are like me, dear lass, you'll know it isn't a question of 'goodness,' the Lord be praised, but a question of love. We'd be sad souls indeed if we'd only our own goodness to look to." Mrs. Fearey took the girl's hands, and holding them in her own small ones, roughened with many years of hard work, she smiled up into the beautiful face above her.

"There, I'll say no more ; I talk too much ; but I'm an old woman, and I seem to grieve when I think young ones may be going to spoil their lives at the outset ; and, Esther, lass"—the little woman hesitated in what she was trying to say. "Don't fret too much about the debt ; even if you were to find that—that the man who holds the mortgage is a hard man—or—anything like that ; not that I know anything about it, but it's better to lose everything in the world than not be true to your own self and your own best feelings. That's all ; that's all I mean ; not to frighten you, lass."

But when Esther was gone, Mrs. Fearey sat down

again before the fire and rocked herself to and fro, muttering and shaking her head. Presently a slow tear gathered and trickled down the sharp face. Trixie saw it, and gave vent to a sudden sharp howl, following it up by two or three long shivering whines.

"Hush, hush, lad," said Mrs. Fearey, wiping her eyes.

But the voice of Trixie's woe had travelled to the next cottage; and presently there was a low tap on the door, which was just ajar; it was gently pushed open, and old Mary's soft white face looked in anxiously.

"There's nothing wrong, Emma Fearey? I heard the dog cry out; so unlike him; I couldn't help looking in to see."

Mary saw that the face raised to meet her was sharpened by some sorrow, and the bright eyes were dimmed under swollen lids. She came further into the kitchen, sympathy showing in every line of her gentle face.

Mrs. Fearey smoothed her eyes and forehead with both hands as though to scrub cobwebs from them. "I'm an untrusting old woman, Mary Richards, and that's about it. I was fretting about a sorrow I seem to see coming on my poor boy. It's like me to go preaching faith to other people and not to have enough myself when a cloud gathers."

"Perhaps the rain won't fall, Emma Fearey," said the gentle old woman, smiling; and without asking questions about the trouble which her friend did not seem to wish to communicate, she sat down on the other side of the fire and talked awhile in her soft voice. Then the two went in together next door to help poor Susan to bed; Mrs. Fearey her own brave self again, if a little pale and "trembly on the legs" as she mentioned to Trixie, though to no one else.

Esther, meanwhile, returned home thinking. Mrs.

Fearey's advice, her strong urging, had crystallized the girl's vague indifference into more definite objection. The strong words of the pilot's widow, and more than her words, her manner and voice, had brought before Esther's mind the reality of the thing she was playing with.

"I shall tell dad I can't," she thought as she entered the gate, and her heart felt lighter as she ran up the path.

Michael looked round as she entered; his eyes were brighter, and there was a look of interest in his melancholy face.

"There you are, my girl, you ought to have been here. The miller's been down again."

Esther flushed uneasily.

"He's set on you as if he was twenty-four," went on Michael triumphantly, "quite a boy for being in love. He came to know what we'd got to say to his offer, and he wanted to see you."

"What did you say, dad?" asked Esther quickly.

"I told him you didn't care for any one else, and you hadn't said 'no'; you could see in a minute how pleased he was."

"*Dad!*" cried the girl, "how could you?—he'll think I meant 'yes.'"

"Well," said Carne rather sullenly, "it was quite true. You can't go saying a thing one day, and backing out of it the next."

"I never said I'd marry him," said Esther indignantly.

"Well, it came to the same thing, so far as I can remember. You said you'd try and like him, and you didn't say 'no.'"

"I'm not promised to him," went on the girl, sitting down by the table and pushing her cloud of hair from her forehead.

Carne made no answer.

CHAPTER XII

'SHE DOESN'T LOVE HIM'

IN two or three days the only subject discussed in Durlmouth was the proposed marriage of the miller and Esther Carne.

Mrs. Fearey had said nothing. The Carnes had said nothing; but the miller himself was far too independent of criticism to trouble about keeping silence when he had decided on a course of action, and therefore mentioned to Saunders that he was intending to marry again in the course of the ensuing summer, and that the bride would be Esther Carne.

Saunders received the news in a stunned silence; he had not even the presence of mind to congratulate his master, but went about his work dazed. Needless to say the news did not take long to spread when Mrs. Saunders realized that such a calamity was to fall upon Durlmouth. And if Michael Carne had heard all that was said he would probably have enjoyed his triumph to the full.

But he was a close prisoner to the house and garden. October was ushered in by mildest quiet days; still days, when sound travelled long distances, and floating leaves seemed to take a long time to reach the ground.

The doctor held out hope of a speedy cure, but the leg remained helpless; and Michael's own great capacity for fretting and making the worst of things, militated against a quick recovery, and kept his health uncertain. He had only one satisfaction and relief, and that was his freedom from monetary anxiety in the future. The nightmare of anxiety about the mortgage did not now prevent his sleeping,

because next summer Esther would marry the miller, and the miller had promised that no further difficulties of the sort should trouble them.

Michael Carne had himself told Mr. Emmett about the debt on the cottage, thinking he was in honour bound to keep nothing back, and Mr. Emmett had received the news without comment or question, simply saying that Carne need not trouble about such a small matter, and that it should be arranged that he might live in the cottage all his days, that it would be Esther's afterwards, and dismissed the subject.

Esther's position was one of greatest difficulty for a girl of the nature she possessed. She loved to be loved. For that reason the antagonism of the village, and the unfriendly spirit manifested had hurt her far more than it would have hurt one of less loving nature. She was far more anxious to please than her reserved bearing betrayed ; praise and admiration were a delight to her ; not because she was vain, but because the approval of others was a thing she eagerly sought without knowing how much it affected her. Her capability of love was deep and faithful, and her power of sympathy wide and sincere. She could not bear to refuse, she could not bear to hurt, she would always rather give way than not, even when her strong reasoning power warned her she made a mistake.

Her love for her father had been the moving power of her life ; it was a deep, faithful affection, with something of protection in it for his weaknesses, and something of tolerance for his mistakes ; though neither of these elements detracted from the strength of the devotion. To see him happy had been her object in life, and for it she had sacrificed all sorts of natural wishes, without being the least aware that she was unselfish. The instinct of self-sacrifice was very strong in Esther Carne, her own necessities the last thing as a rule that ever occurred to her, and to see

her father's gloomy eyes lighten with pleasure, an abiding joy worth any effort.

It may be easy to realize then how difficult was her position at the present crisis. She did not mind poverty and worry for herself, but she dreaded it for Michael, with his rather morbid way of exaggerating the darkness of a dark cloud. He was weak and irritable; his physique run down by confinement and worry. He looked thinner and greyer. As he dragged himself out with the help of two sticks to sit in a sheltered corner and enjoy the sunshine of the still days, she saw that he stooped, and that his tall wiry frame had lost its look of energy and endurance. His one interest and excitement was the prospect of his daughter's brilliant future. Not that he talked a great deal or boasted, but he took a quiet satisfaction in the secure future; the gradual melting of the little store of money did not depress him, and he looked at the cottage with a sense of peaceful possession, after making little plans for small improvements.

With all this daily before her eyes, nothing more difficult than Esther's position could have been imagined, for a woman of Esther's temperament. To disappoint him, to hurt him and destroy his castle in the air, was a far harder task for her than offering herself up, to please him. Thus the days passed; and the position drifted. Mrs. Fearey said no more. Esther went to see her often, and tried by every means to lift the shadow that seemed to have fallen over the bright courage of the sharp face; but they tacitly avoided the subject of the miller.

As to Mr. Emmett himself, it must be said that he behaved with consideration. He was quite aware that Esther did not care for him, but as she did not care for any one else this troubled him very little. He was wise in his wooing; for he did not tease the girl with any assumption of authority, or with lover's attentions; but

talked to her pleasantly when he came to see her father, which he did fairly often, bringing a bottle of good wine, newspapers, a fine fowl, or even a goose.

There was no doubt that he was greatly attracted by the beautiful high-spirited girl he proposed to marry, and the best side of his nature came out in the self-control he displayed in his wooing. Esther found him pleasant, and saw that to Michael his visits were a pleasure and a benefit, and thus it was that though, as she told herself, "she was not promised to him," yet, still the situation was drifting into acquiescence on her part, and security on the miller's.

Matters stood exactly so, when Stephen Weld came back again after a longer turn than usual. He heard the news at Salterne from one of the Durlmouth boats.

A man of weaker character would probably have betrayed his disappointment; in which case it would have been "all over the town" that Esther Carne had jilted Steve Weld for the miller. Stephen knew this, and he considered Esther's name first. No man should cast a stone at the woman he loved. Besides, thought the pilot, whose mind was essentially just and clear—"If I loved her I've only myself to blame; she never looked at me; she never thought of me, so far as I know." He did not attempt to persuade himself that Esther had led him on; he had simply laid his heart at her feet, without encouragement, and the girl had trodden on the treasure, unknowing.

Mrs. Fearey's nervous excitement when they met proved to Stephen that she had something to tell him, and it also proved to him that the little woman had penetrated his secret before his departure.

Going straight to the point, as was his wont, Steve put his two powerful hands gently on his aunt's slender shoulders, and turned her round to meet his gaze.

"Aunt," he said, "I heard in the town that—that Esther is going to marry the miller."

Mrs. Fearey, looking up into his strong face, saw lines there which were not there before, and her loving heart ached ; she was just going to speak, but Stephen went on checking her eager sympathy.

"Don't you think, aunt, that she ever gave me a word or look to raise the bit of hope in my heart. It was all on my side, you saw that ; you told me love would breed love. You knew I'd been taken with her ; I didn't know you knew how deep it had gone. I tell you, aunt, I—I didn't know myself till I knew I'd lost her." The muscles round his mouth quivered—he paused a moment and then recovering command went on quietly, "She never gave me word or look that she mightn't have given her brother if she'd had one. I could see she didn't think, and I thought she was so young that I'd wait till she grew to want me, perhaps ; I never thought she loved Emmett."

This was too much for Mrs. Fearey ; she shook her head vigorously, and he stopped surprised.

"She doesn't—she doesn't love the miller."

"Doesn't love him," exclaimed Stephen, dropping his hands from her shoulders, and clenching them slowly as they fell to his sides. "Then what is she marrying him for?"

"To please her father," cried Mrs. Fearey. "Oh, it's a coil of worry, lad, and God forgive me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me no good will come of it ; no, don't you speak, wait a moment. It's nobody's fault, and it's everybody's fault. The miller fell in love with Esther, he went to Michael and asked if he could keep company with his daughter, making promises full of advantage to them both. Michael Carne was pleased at the prospect for his girl—that was natural—he sort of put it before her what a good thing it would be if she could get to like Mr. Emmett ; seeing she cared for no one else, not as he knew, or she knew

either. Esther, she didn't like it at first. 'I've never thought about the miller,' she said."

Stephen straightened his back and a light shone in his clear eyes, but Mrs. Fearey, breathless with excitement, put up her hand to deprecate interruption, and continued—

"She hadn't thought about man, or marrying; but, there, it's her nature to want to please; she loves her father beyond all the world. She didn't say 'Yes,' but she didn't say 'No' exactly. She wouldn't promise herself; but the miller just took it for granted; and Michael was so pleased that she hasn't the heart to spoil his pleasure. The miller has been very good to her father these bad times, and then there was the money."

"What about money?" demanded Stephen almost fiercely.

"I don't know if I ought to say," said the little woman tremulously, "but I can't make you understand quite without."

"Don't tell me anything if they told you not to mention it," said the pilot.

"She didn't ask me not to speak," said Mrs. Fearey, "only it was their business, lad, not mine, and a still tongue's always best. The fact is they raised a bit of money on the house—a mortgage for one year. The Rockhampton lawyer did it for them. It seemed a simple business when Michael was in full work, but this accident has thrown them back so that Esther has had to use all the money, or most of it, that they meant to pay back."

Stephen's face clouded as he listened. When his aunt paused he asked a question or two about the amount raised, the interest, the conditions of the loan, and so on. Mrs. Fearey told him what she knew, for both Esther and Michael had spoken before her of details at different times, and she understood their position.

The pilot considered quietly, leaning against the door-post and staring over the little garden, across the road, at the noble rise of the sweeping down in the distance. He was not a rapid thinker, but his conclusions when arrived at were very just. In this case the conclusion seemed on the surface very simple.

"I suppose they have no reason to think that the person who has advanced the loan will be hard on them," he said at last. "If the interest is paid the mortgage can be renewed. That will give Carne time to put it right next summer. The cottage is worth a good deal more than that, with the land. It isn't pleasant to live in debt, but it must be better to do that than to marry a man you've no love for," and he sighed impatiently. Mrs. Fearey made as though she would speak, and then paused.

Stephen looked round at her; their eyes met, and something in hers made him exclaim with sudden energy of decision—

"Aunt, you're keeping something back—what is it?"

"Steve, I don't know if I ought to say. It's a suspicion, an idea; I've no ground, or very little, for it; no proof."

"What is it?" said the pilot, watching her distressed face; "never mind if you've no proof, tell me what's in your mind; you can trust me, aunt."

And Mrs. Fearey thus encouraged went on—

"It's been in my mind a long while, ever since the day you came back last time. Don't you remember telling me you saw him in the garden of old Tewkesbury's cottage, looking round?"

"*Him*," said Stephen frowning; "you mean Emmett. Just so." He paused. "Well!"

"Well," went on Mrs. Fearey, dropping her voice, "then it flew into my mind that *he* is the man."

"What, the man that holds the mortgage?"

The little woman nodded vigorously.

There was another pause, then Stephen said slowly, with a man's sense of logic—

"I can't see that his walking round the cottage should be proof that he holds the mortgage. It was natural he should feel a curiosity about the place."

Mrs. Fearey shook her head deprecatingly.

"I don't say it's a proof; the thought jumped into my mind and there it stayed. I seem to see that it is so."

"The firm they went to were Emmett's lawyers," said Stephen, "didn't you say, aunt?"

Mrs. Fearey nodded.

"And the miller has been wanting to buy the place these years. He made old Tewkesbury a fancy offer, and when the old man refused, he said he'd wait till he was gone. He dislikes to see that corner of Big Field not belonging to his land, I fancy."

"It may be as you think," said the pilot thoughtfully, after a long pause.

"Aye, lad, it is," said Mrs. Fearey, with the decision of absolute conviction.

Stephen smiled, but it was a smile without joy in it.

"I'm going for a bit of a stroll, aunt," he said, with an obvious effort, "I'll be back again by supper-time," and, gently refusing Trixie's offers of companionship, he strode off into the dusk of the autumn twilight.

"It was good of you to want to go with him, my dear," said Mrs. Fearey, shutting the door when she could no longer see the tall figure of the pilot. "It was like mother's own child; but there, you couldn't have done it; your will's a deal better than your power. Ah, Trixie, lad, there's ever so much we'd do if we could but do it; we must leave it, and that's where the trial comes."

Stephen walked on and on straight ahead, con-

sidering very little whither he was walking, except that it was away from the village. Following the Rockhampton road first, he presently turned off it, through a rickety field-gate, and tramped over the rough ground towards the edge of the cliff.

A mile beyond Durlmouth there was another cove ; a lonely curve in the coast-line, to which the great cliffs dipped in shelving terraces.

Some time, once, there had been an upheaval here and a landslip, which formed what was called in those parts a "bunny." The strand was firm glistening sand, and big bits of cliff had fallen down time after time, and become bedded ; not even the ocean rollers that came racing in from the south-west having sufficient strength to dislodge them.

To this lonely little bay Stephen instinctively bent his steps. He used to come here when a lad because he felt like the king of a desert island, and because the noise and wrangling of the boys down by the quays at the creek worried him. He had been here in all weathers. When the sea was like glass, and Black Rock Bill stood out a long blue spur to seawards farther down ; when the sand was glistening gold in the summer sun, and the tiny ripples stole round the foot of the fallen rock giants. He had been when the waves rolled in, green and transparent, with a lace edge of white curling trimming ; when the sky was blue with a rushing under-current of fleecy white, and the gulls were swirling and shrieking. And he had been when the Black Rock spur was lost in driving, biting sleet, when walls of black water thundered up from the gloom and poured overwhelming over the rocks, shaking them in their sand-beds, and sweeping away to the foot of the broken cliff beyond ; when the whole little bay seemed alive with sobs and moans of storm-fiends, and the mad riot of winds and waves at their wildest games.

To-night, it was neither of these. Grey and still ; far away a low rumbling and murmur of something ; people said the "bunny" moaned when a storm was coming ; grey water heaving and restless ; grey sky fading into night ; and the faint chill of autumn sadness on all.

Stephen followed a natural path down into the cove, one he had used many a time, and towards which his feet turned naturally ; springing down from rock to rock, sliding on the shale, he reached the water's edge, and there sat down to think out alone what was in his mind.

All that his aunt had told him, in her torrent of excited narration required consideration. Stephen never jumped at conclusions ; they were formed after rather slow judgment, and once formed he did not easily change his mind.

He had of course made up his mind on first hearing of Esther's coming marriage, that she loved the miller ; on learning to the contrary a wild sense of relief had made his heart leap and beat again, and he had come here to be alone, that he might realize what it was that he hoped for.

With elbows resting on his knees, and square chin sunk on his strong palms, the pilot stared out ahead at the heaving grey plain, and slowly realized that his hope was delusive and unattainable ; for him that was, it might not have been so for another man.

Esther was the point in question : Esther's happiness, Esther's comfort, Esther's good.

Granted that she did not love the miller now ; she would probably some day. She liked him evidently, and she had no thought of himself (Stephen) but one of good fellowship. The miller was wealthy, and could give her every possible advantage ; he (Stephen) earned good money, and was quite well enough off to have given her a good home, and kept her in easy

circumstances ; but there were the old women to consider. Stephen had never thought of himself and his possible future needs. He was not only his aunt's main support, but he had been in the habit of doing so much for the two old widows, that any change in his manner of living would deprive them of much they had become accustomed to almost without knowing it. Had it not been for his quiet generosity all these years, there would have been money in the bank to help Esther meet this debt, and set her free to follow her own heart without bias of circumstances. As it was, there was little more than ten pounds ; for it was not long since he had insisted on better doctor's attendance for Susan, and settled the bill himself.

Had Esther loved him they would have waited together, she being so young ; there would soon have been enough for all needs without turning back from the duty he had set himself. It may be said that to Stephen the idea never occurred that he would shirk that self-imposed duty. The patient old women depended on him in their old age and weakness ; moreover, he must never allow his aunt's keen sight to pierce the fact that this happiness might have been possible but for his responsibilities, or the bread she eat would be bitter to her generous and loving nature.

Anything would have been possible if Esther had loved him, and the pilot's strong figure seemed to become so immovable as almost to want breath, as the wave passed over his soul, and retreated, leaving it to realize that the dream of his life was impossible ; that he had awakened to love only to put it from him for ever.

As he could do little or nothing himself, and the miller could do so much, he considered that he was in honour bound not even to show his love for Esther ; though she did not love Mr. Emmett, and had not perhaps promised herself actually as yet.

With the returning thought of the miller came a sense of indignation to Stephen Weld. He sat up and threw back his square shoulders, and restlessly opened and closed his strong hands.

"The man that can influence a girl's conduct by bringing money to bear that way isn't worthy of her. More than that, he's a coward; the girl's pushed in a corner by worries and troubles; he's taking unfair advantage; he's no better than a coward."

It was the worst Stephen ever said of any man, and he never said it unless he felt a man deserved the stricture.

His thoughts ran on.

"And if he is a coward, which he is, what might he not do in the event of Esther awakening to a feeling that she could not marry for advantage and liking merely! If Mrs. Fearey's instinct was true, the miller held a greater power over the father and daughter than even Esther knew. If he were a coward, why should he scruple to use the power?"

Stephen looked down at his powerful brown hands and smiled sadly to himself.

"Not much use, for all you can do more than any other hands for twenty miles east and west of Durlmouth." The sense of helplessness, which is perhaps the hardest of all things to bear, was weighing on his soul; and it was new to Stephen, for never in his life yet had he met with a difficulty that he had not faced and overcome by patience, judgment, or strength.

When he got up to go, the cove was wrapped in deep shadow, but on the heaving face of the sea, and above on the cliffs the reflection of the past sunset left a little light.

Stephen looked up and began slowly to ascend out of the darkness to the lighter darkness above. He made no noise, moving with certain footsteps of old habit up the broken rocks. As he neared the top he

seemed to see a figure standing motionless on the bleak edge, looking out to sea, but thinking it was his fancy, dismissed the idea. Who would come alone to Rocky Cove after dark?

But his keen sight had not deceived him, and as he gained the level he saw distinctly at no great distance a tall figure standing almost at the edge of the cliff, looking out to sea. He was a little puzzled in the dusk at the shape of the figure, which seemed to him peculiar until he realized that it was a woman with a shawl over her head.

Perhaps he made some noise stumbling over the rough ground, for she turned from her quiet contemplation, and looked round, but not with any haste or appearance of trepidation.

"Steve, Steve Weld!"

The pilot started forward; the embodiment of his thoughts was here, and her voice chased out of his mind for the moment the memory of his resolutions. In another second he was holding Esther's hand, and searching her face in the gloom, but the shadow of the shawl hid what the night left revealed, and the girl did not throw back the folds as she looked up at him.

"I knew you by your height," she said, with a little laugh. "You looked like a giant in the dusk, Steve. Have you just come home?"

That afternoon, Stephen told her.

"And you have seen your aunt?"

There was a little nervous anxiety on both sides, though Esther wondered why she should feel so interested in what Mrs. Fearey might have told her nephew. She turned her face homewards and they moved on side by side.

Suddenly Stephen said—

"Yes, I saw Aunt Fearey, and she told me all the news. That is, she told me what I had heard in

Salterne was true, and that you were going to marry the miller."

He tried to speak with kind indifference ; that is, without personal feeling except interest as a friend, and succeeded so well that Esther was conscious of a little pang, a faint sense of loneliness.

"There is nothing settled," she said abruptly.

"Well, I suppose Mr. Emmett thinks it is settled or he wouldn't have said that he was going to be married in the summer ; and Mr. Carne seems to think it is settled."

"Oh, father !—yes, I expect he does." There was a tone of impatience in the girl's voice which had a tired sound in it, unnoticed by Stephen, who was not a very close observer of moods. "It would be a very great benefit to father," she went on, with a desire to justify what the pilot had not criticized.

"Ah, I expect it would. The miller can do a good deal for him ; and for you too, Esther," said Stephen gently.

"It doesn't matter about me." The girl was staring straight ahead, the outline of her face hidden by the shawl. "It's all right about me, so long as father's comfortable."

The pilot could have cried out against this doctrine as he looked down at the girlish figure by his side, and remembered her motherless, unadvised ; all the protective manhood in his nature rose against the sacrifice of her life.

Words rose to his lips ; then he remembered that he had nothing to offer in comparison to the miller. If Esther accepted him, she and her father would probably lose the cottage ; he could not ask her to sacrifice so many advantages for his sake ; the words died unspoken, and the two walked on side by side.

As he opened the gate, for her to pass into the road

he said, suddenly remembering her lonely vigil on the cliff—

“Not many people come to the cove alone ; you’re not nervous?”

“Why should I be nervous?” said the girl quietly. “Down Cornwall way I used to go on the cliffs a good bit alone ; I soon found out this place, and I come here pretty often. There’s such a noise down the village way ; you can think up here in the quiet.”

“It’s quiet enough except for the sea,” said the pilot, “stormy weather it’s grand. I’ve been here ever since I was a bit of a lad ; you get fond of the place, and seem to learn the face of it in fair and foul, like the face of a friend.”

Esther drew the shawl closer round her, a cold hand seemed to clutch her heart ; in one brief moment the weight of life’s responsibility rose before her and shattered her light way of testing things by expediency only. A little glimpse into the heart of life shook her soul ; “fair and foul” must come to all ; how was she arming herself for the battle? The grave voice of the pilot touched a chord in her that rang a note of warning ; why, she could hardly say, except that she was sad to-night—“silly” she said to herself.

Stephen walked as far as the cottage with her, and the rest of the way they said little, though neither realized that they were silent.

“Won’t you come in and see father?” said the girl.

“To-morrow if you’ll have me,” answered Stephen. “I think aunt is a bit dull to-night.”

The light from the door streamed down the path. Michael had set it open for air as the night was so still ; the shaft fell on Esther as she stood waiting, her face turned homewards.

She was very white, or else the light made her appear so ; the wrapping shawl and the cloud of

dusky hair making the paleness more pronounced still. There were shadows round her large eyes in which was an expression Stephen could not read—wistful, restless, appealing, tormented ; something of the troubled soul betrayed in their dark depths.

"You're not looking well, Esther," said Stephen anxiously.

"You're not looking well, Stephen," repeated the girl, with a sudden laugh. "Don't talk to *me*. No, really I'm all right ; good-night," and she walked quickly up the path, turning back once at the door to shade her eyes and try to pierce the dark rendered darker by the light within.

CHAPTER XIII

STEPHEN KEEPS HIS RESOLUTION



STEPHEN WELD remained at Durlmouth about a fortnight ; and all the time kept his resolution with a quiet determination that did not allow him to come one step nearer to the woman he loved. He did not betray his feeling by word or deed ; for he was not one of the sort that makes a sacrifice and then advertises it. It was part of his principles to trouble no one with his own sorrows ; purely personal sorrows ; considering that they probably had as much to bear in other ways as he had, and not wishing to add to their burdens.

Old Susan, weaker and quieter, was carried out for two rides, on the mildest of the chill days ; and the pilot did his best to persuade Carne to try the chair, "to get a breath of air from the down," but

to no purpose. The Cornishman shook his head, and refused "to be pulled about like an old woman!"

"You ought to get out of the garden," said Stephen.

Michael Carne turned away his head with a sound of irritation; disappointment and confinement were trying to his temper.

Later on, in the garden, Esther went quietly up to Stephen and pulled his sleeve; he turned quickly with a way he had in answering her, as though every word she spoke was sacred.

"I know what dad's longing after," said the girl, looking up into the strong grave face with confidence. "It's *Brown Bird*. I believe if we could get him out to sea a bit he'd pick up. I can't take him alone, but young Dave would come if——" and she looked eagerly into his eyes.

"If I would help, eh?" said the pilot, smiling. "Why didn't you ask me before? it's simple as paint."

"It seems a shame to take advantage of—of your kindness," said Esther, a little flush stealing over her soft cheeks to her ears.

The pilot looked at her. For a moment he seemed about to speak; then, his face set in additional squareness, the light died out of his clear eyes leaving a little frown between the brows, and he said—

"Let's go in and ask him. We could go out to-day."

At first Michael demurred, chiefly at the trouble to the pilot, but his desire was so strong that he allowed his scruple to be overruled, and when Stephen went off to hunt up young Dave, he was like a child in his feverish excitement over the coming pleasure.

Stephen returned very quickly saying that Dave was gone to the boat, and that he had come to help Michael down to the quay, thinking he would like to sit on board while the sails were run up. The three started in high spirits, Esther and Stephen supporting Michael on either side.

Crossing the bridge they met the miller, who had come out on seeing the brown sails stirring after so many weeks of sleep.

"Hullo, Carne, glad to see you down here. Surely you're not going out, though?"

"I am, sir," said Michael, whose dark eyes were shining with excitement. "I feel as if it would do me a world of good. Steve Weld here is kind enough to say he'll take the *Bird* out, and I can't refuse, I feel to wish it so."

"Ah," said Mr. Emmett, glancing at Stephen as though he had but just noticed his presence, "morning, Weld"—his tone was patronizing. "You know your own business best; of course Esther is not going."

Esther raised her head; she had till now been looking on the ground and kicking little stones restlessly with her toe.

"I'm going with dad," she said quietly.

"I cannot allow it," said Mr. Emmett. "Esther's position is not quite the same as it was, you must recognize that. I don't wish her to go on the ketches, doing man's work now; I'll send one of the men from the yard. Here, Saunders," and he turned slowly towards the mill, strolling along with his hands in his pockets, and a quiet air of authority.

Stephen said nothing; but the lines of his mouth seemed to harden. Michael stood resolute; but Esther flushed from brow to chin.

"Mr. Emmett," she called, and there was the slightest tremble in her voice.

The miller turned round. Saunders had come out of the mill at his master's call.

"I'm going with dad," repeated the girl, drawing up her tall figure.

"Nonsense," said the miller sharply, he was not accustomed to be questioned.

"I'm going with dad whenever I like, and *he* likes," said the girl, her clear tones distinctly audible for the benefit of Saunders and clustering mill-hands in the doorway behind him. "It's no business of any one else's. No one but dad has a right to order me!"

"I certainly have the right to interfere when you do things unsuitable to my position," said the miller, his prominent eyes full of an expression that Michael had never before seen, while a scarlet flush spread over his fair face. "I will send one of my men to work the boat with Weld, if she must go out, but I won't have Esther working among the common villagers."

The colour faded entirely out of Esther's face as she returned the miller's look. And it might almost have been said that her eyes flashed, had such a thing been possible; such a fierce light shone in their dark depths.

"I am a common villager," she said, with perfect calmness, lowering her voice rather than raising it. "And dad's a common villager; so I'll work as they do. Go on, Steve, we won't keep dad standing, it tires him more than anything." And she moved forward, ignoring the miller, who turned on his heel and walked off to his house.

"You've offended him badly," said Carne, a few minutes later as he sat down on the arrangement of ropes and sails prepared for him; he spoke uneasily.

"Dad," said Esther—her hands were trembling, but otherwise she showed no sign of disturbance—"dad, you're the last person in the world to let yourself be ordered about by any one. What does it matter if he is offended?"

"There's the money, my girl, the money; it binds me hand and foot thinking about it. I couldn't bear to lose the little place, in the face of all the villagers too."

And Stephen heard what he said, though it was spoken low.

"Don't you fret, dear dad," answered the girl, "you shan't lose the place," and Stephen heard her sigh as she turned away.

Though the beginning was not auspicious, the sail ended most successfully.

Michael seemed to breathe new life from the open sea, and Esther had the happiness of seeing him sleep that night as he had not slept for many weeks. A few days after, Stephen Weld went away again, and the miller came and made his peace.

It was certainly not Mr. Emmett's habit to humble himself to any one, but he was greatly attracted by Esther Carne, and her very daring and independence made the attraction stronger. Had she been eager to marry him, it is more than probable that the miller would have thought nothing about it. Her indifference and opposition, combined with her beauty and intelligence, increased almost daily this first passion of the man's life. The miller had never desired anything before but money and power; now, he desired to win above all things this girl who did not want him, but who put up with him for her father's sake. The miller was not blind; and he had no scruples in using the power, which a man of more delicate feelings of honour would have wished to forget, as a lever for the attainment of a much-desired end.

Michael Carne was relieved when he saw that Mr. Emmett bore no malice.

"He was very kind," said the master of *Brown Bird*, looking at his daughter rather anxiously. "He's not half a bad sort, the miller."

Esther shrugged her shoulders. She was restless and pre-occupied.

"Is Steve Weld gone?" asked Carne presently.

The girl nodded without speaking; there was a dreamy look in her large eyes, and the lines round her mouth drooped sadly.

"I think I'll go and see Mrs. Fearey presently,

dad," she said. "They'll be so lonely up at the two cottages."

Stephen Weld came home once again before Christmas, but the Carnes did not see much of him. It was too cold to sail for pleasure, the weather being also stormy and wet. Michael was better, and able to get about alone with one stick, but he was greatly aged and broken. The months of enforced idleness, the setting aside of his boat for the others had been a bitter trial; his mind exaggerated the triumph of his rivals, whom he pictured rejoicing at his long weakness, whereas in reality the village was taken up with its own concerns, and thinking far less about the new-comers than they had done at first. In fact there were many people in the little community who were sorry for Esther and her father, and only wanted a little encouragement to show a neighbourly spirit; but the Carnes gave them no opportunity. Esther made her few purchases at the village shop without entering into conversation; never took the least notice of small overtures, and prided herself on keeping the Durlmouth folk at arm's-length. Michael thought, and said, that if people "made up" to them at all, it was only because Esther was going to marry the miller; therefore the breach widened, and the Carnes lived for themselves only.

A soberness had come upon Mrs. Fearey in these dull days. Trixie was very bad with the rheumatics, and the two seldom went out. Esther went to see them often, but the sharp tongue was not so gay, and there seemed to be more lines in the small face, while the bright eyes were not so bright. Mrs. Fearey would have remained undimmed by any trouble that visited herself, personally. Her faith in God was a very real and practical support, but she was feeling what she could not reach, the trouble of another whom she loved far better than herself. Gladly would she have lived blind, crippled, or suffering for the

remainder of her days, to have given Stephen his heart's desire. But she was condemned to see him suffer, unable to reach him by any self-sacrifice.

Mrs. Fearey saw no way out of the difficulty. Stephen himself, warned by his feeling, avoided Esther on his second visit home. The few days in her company, the sight of her beautiful face, the sound of her voice, increased his torture a hundred-fold. His love did not die because she was apparently out of his reach ; it grew as he had watched her struggles and uncertainty, her wavering purpose, and impulsive changes. She was so sweet and generous-hearted, so loving and helpless. The pilot found that so far from losing interest in her, his absorption in her life and happiness grew with every meeting, and that it required all his great power of self-control to prevent the passionate desire to take her in his arms once for all, tell her to rest in his love, and let him think and work for her.

Mrs. Fearey saw the agony of the struggle, while on the other hand she knew that Esther had but ten pounds left when the Christmas interest should be paid ; that Michael would not be in full work till the spring, and that he was depending wholly on the miller's support and countenance.

Winter was a hard time for the old woman. Susan was worse, and only kept from sinking by the care and generosity of Stephen. Mary had seen the change in the pilot's face, but characteristically she said nothing ; only adding one more petition to her patient faithful prayers, that Steve's trouble should be lightened if it was well for him that it should be so. The pilot's earnings from his last voyage melted, and he saw them go with the one care that his old pensioners should not know it was a pang.

He was not at home for Christmas, but a few days afterwards brought him cheery and strong, brightening the little houses like spring sunshine, as he set

himself to put his own troubles in the background and make the lives of the old women easier.

Esther heard he was come through a passing vision of the little woman flying down to the village for some extra groceries, as she was hanging out a few clothes to dry in the cold winter sunshine.

"Hullo!" she said, laughing, for a hasty shawl cast over the felt hat added greatly to the odd appearance of the small figure. "Where are you going so fast, Mrs. Fearey?"

"My boy's come home, and it's always the way. I'm run out of two or three things just when I want to do a bit of cooking." There was a spot of colour on Mrs. Fearey's cheek, and her voice had its old clear ring.

"Stephen come back," said Esther. "I didn't know he was expected." She found herself sticking the clothes-peg so clumsily on the line that she pinched her finger and let the clothes drop.

"Oh, you never can tell," said Mrs. Fearey gaily. "It's just as the ships come in, or who gets taken off first, I suppose. But there I must stop, I'm as busy as can be."

"How is Baby?" asked Esther, stooping to pick up the fallen cloth and rising again with a flush spreading to her ears and neck.

"Oh, he's not near so bad; when he sees Steve he got off his chair and quite jumped. Heart is what Trixie wants; he's been low-spirited of late. Again and again have I said to him, 'Don't you lose heart, the winter can't last for ever.' But there, he seemed so down. 'Mother,' he's said to me often time, 'I'm getting old, and I feel it in my bones.' Then I say, 'Old, what nonsense! What's fourteen!' I said, 'and your mother over sixty?' But there,"—and the little woman drew the shawl round her thin shoulders and pursed her lips, "fourteen is old for a dog, and he knows it; you can't deceive Trixie, he knows as well as well."

"Do send him to me when he can walk more easily," said Esther, who seemed to herself to be saying words for the sake of talking, while the song of birds and joy of spring-time was welling up in her heart.

"Oh, I will, I will, my dear. And he knows. 'Go down village road and see Esther,' I say to him, 'and if the gate's shut mind you call,' and he just says, 'All right, mother,' and off he'll go."

"He hasn't been a long while," said the girl smiling; "I miss him dreadfully," and she waved her hand gaily to the retreating figure.

"What a beauty the child's growing!" muttered the little woman to herself. "Her eyes were like stars when she smiled. Ah well, who knows?—perhaps the Lord will interfere; we must have patience." And she trotted on her way talking to herself.

Esther carried in the empty basket, singing under her breath.

"It's a long while since I heard you sing, my girl," said Michael, looking up from some netting he was trying to accomplish with chilled fingers, for the fire was very small.

Esther blushed.

"Was I singing, dad? Oh, something came over me that the shortest day was passed and the spring would soon be here, and I shall look for the little lilac-buds, and the bees will be creeping out, and all the land looking lovely again. I'm tired of winter—tired, tired of winter!" And she stretched her long arms; then moving quickly to Michael's side, she turned his face up by the chin and kissed him on his eyes and nose.

"Do you love me, daddie?" she said in her soft coaxing tones.

"You know I do, lass," and Michael's deep eyes shone as they never shone for any one else.

Esther hugged him in return, then laughed again.

and ran off into the wash-house, where she sang softly to herself with dreamy eyes hidden in the shadow of long lashes. And Michael listened, understanding by his quick power of sympathy that something had dawned in Esther's heart.

Stephen did not appear at the Carnes' cottage that night, but Esther was happy, she did not ask herself why. The next day passed without a visit from the pilot.

On the afternoon of the third day the girl announced her intention of going to see Mrs. Fearey. Michael looked at her quickly; there was question in his mind and in his eyes, and a little anxiety. But Esther took no notice of it; her own eyes wore a look of listening, and her sweet mouth trembled with a nervous tension. Later on she carried her plan into action and was gone about an hour. Michael was smoking at the door, and watched her come up the path on her return.

Her head was bent; when she came up to him she lifted her eyes and smiled, but there was a slight effort in the smile, and her face looked thin by reason of the droop of its lines. She passed her arm through her father's and gently rubbed her forehead against his sleeve and shoulders, in a way she had, ever since she was tall enough to reach, and before that when she was a small maiden sitting on his knee, because there was no mother to nurse her.

Michael stroked the thick dusky hair tenderly. "Tired, my lass?" he said.

Esther answered nothing, but drew a little closer to his side, running her slim long fingers restlessly along the edge of the collar and lappets of his working coat.

"Mrs. Fearey was all alone," she said presently, twisting a button.

"Ah!" said Michael. "Steve wasn't there, then?" The girl shook her head.

"Steve was gone to Rockhampton on business." Then after a pause, "He's only going to be here a few days longer ; he's going back very soon this time."

"Plenty to do, I expect," said Michael ; he did not know quite what to say.

Esther sighed. There was another pause.

"Let's go in, dad, it's so dreadfully cold," and she gave a little dreary shiver.

"There's a storm coming up," said Michael, rather glad to change the subject. "Did you hear the 'bunny' to-night ? All along the coast the moan is coming up from the sea."

"It's quite clear," said Esther ; "quite fine, and clear, and hardly any wind."

"Too clear by half ! It's been so all day. There's a spell of bad weather coming soon. Well, we can't expect anything else in January. Shut the door, lass, and come to the fire, your hands are cold as ice."

Esther lay long without sleep that night. Outside the air was still as though all small sounds were frozen, and the long muffled boom of the "bunny" sounded monotonously ominous.

Stephen Weld returned very late, and sat eating his supper in the little kitchen at the two cottages.

"There's dirty weather coming up from the sea, aunt," he said.

"Thank God you're on land, then," said Mrs. Fearey cheerfully.

Stephen lighted his pipe and drew two or three long breaths, then he said soberly, looking at the fire—

"It's all the same, aunt, if you believe in the love of God. Land or sea, storm or shine. You can't be a bit safer in one than the other ; it's all according to His will."

The little woman gave an eager gesture of assent.

"Seems as though it's a poor sort of belief that only depends on God when there's no stormy weather round," went on the pilot. "When I say

stormy weather, I don't mean only the winds that blow, but stormy weather in life. We can be fine an' believing when everything goes along swimmingly; the thing is not to get shaken when everything goes cross seas. Supposing a man has a happy life, fair and easy, good health, he believes in God, and says God is good and just. Then supposing he sets his heart on something, sets his heart desperately on something, and God shows him the thing is not for him, and he's got to live all his days without it; now will he say God is good and just then? My idea is that he ought to, if he loses all that makes the world worth having; and if he finds it in his heart to say that it seemed hard the thing should have come into his life at all unless he could have it, it's a man's plain duty to put all that right out of his mind, and trust with all his soul—not half-hearted fashion."

"If this world was every bit we had to live for, it would be difficult to see the justice of things sometimes, lad," said Mrs. Fearey soberly. "But when you come to feel it's but the school-house!—bless you, there's a world of happiness in trusting. Look at the children; if they got all they wanted they'd be sick enough often. They have to trust *us*; it's a wonder how they do it, loving little souls, when you see what poor, faulty humans we all are. They're a lesson to us oftentimes. I've had it proved to me again and again in my life, and Mary Richards will tell you the same—that all the comfort and peace in the world comes of trusting, and you can't go wrong. Even in this life we see every day the reasons why; then what will it be in the other world, when all's bright and clear? Why, we shall look back and laugh, I do believe, to think how silly we were with our fretting, when the loving Lord was doing the best possible, and we fighting and crying against it."

The little woman furtively wiped a tear.

"You've seen a lot of trouble, aunt," said the pilot

affectionately. "I ought to be ashamed, fighting against my first trouble, when a little woman like you has such a brave heart."

"I'm old, lad, I'm old," cried Mrs. Fearey, stretching out her little hard hand, and laying it tenderly on his big brown one. "I learned hardly, I didn't always trust. I fought more than most, for I had a strong will, like you."

There was a pause. Presently Stephen got up slowly and knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the fender. Then he said, in what his aunt called his "set" voice—

"I'm not going to see anything of Esther this time, aunt, nor the next. Not till I can see her without feeling as I do. It's not a bit of use looking at what you can't get."

"She was here this afternoon," said Mrs. Fearey.

"Here, was she?" A deep flush spread over the pilot's brown cheek, and then slowly faded, leaving it white under the surface tan. Then he turned his head and looked at the little woman with pain in his honest eyes. "See how I feel, aunt, just to hear she's been in the place. What's the good of it? She doesn't care for me. And, even if I could make her care by all the love I could show, it wouldn't be fair, seeing all she and Carne would have to lose by it. I made up my mind when I was away that I wouldn't see more of her than could be helped; I could have come home a bit sooner, but I stayed away to make the visit shorter. I shall go Thursday——"

"What, next Thursday!" Mrs. Fearey's voice was dismayed.

"Yes, it will be better; to-day's Tuesday."

"I knew you couldn't stay long this time; I told Esther a few days, but I didn't think of Thursday. But there, lad, I'm a selfish old woman. Do what's best and right, and you'll have the Lord on your side to help you."

Thus it happened that the next day passed without Esther seeing the pilot. In the afternoon she wandered to the cove with some restless, unexpressed hope in her mind. But he was not there. The rocks looked bleak and grey; a heavy haze was gathering out to sea, and the grey water heaved with a slow, deep swell as of strong movement far away perhaps, or some deep restless throb in the heart of the sea. Little gusts of cutting wind came up suddenly from the greyness, sinking to perfect stillness after a few half-hearted buffets at the sleeping rocks. Esther turned away home, seeing no sign of a living soul.

On Thursday she went to the village shop for a few necessities, and returning between the frost-sprinkled hedges she suddenly met Stephen Weld, walking quickly, with his pilot coat over his guernsey, and a bundle in his hand.

They stopped with one accord.

"I heard you were back, but I haven't had a glimpse of you this time," said Esther, and there was a suspicion of reproach behind the shining pleasure in her eyes, as she raised them.

Stephen's face was impassive.

"I've not been here long," he said. "Aunt told me your father was getting along finely. I was glad to hear he is on the mend."

"Perhaps you will come in and see him," said Esther. There was a little tremble in her lips in spite of her effort to show no sign.

"You're very kind; I'd be pleased to another time, but I'm just off."

The colour faded slowly from Esther's face, as she met the resolute glance of the pilot's clear eyes.

"What, off again to Salterne; to work?"

"There's plenty doing," said Weld. The trouble in the girl's expressive face, shook his resolution and pierced his heart. The effort of restraint made his tone abrupt.

Esther's pride resented what she thought was a snub.

"Well, good-bye, then, I won't keep you. Come and see me when you are back," and she smiled, with a little nod, and passing him, walked on quietly homewards, outwardly unmoved, though sight and hearing seemed for the time suspended.

Stephen Weld walked away rapidly, his eyes fixed on the road ahead, and his mouth grimly set.

"I believe, I believe she *might* have loved me," he thought.

CHAPTER XIV

'I SAW HIM DROWN'

HE "bunny" had not given its customary warning for nothing. The wind rose slowly but steadily through the following night; blowing from the east, bitterly cold, though the village was sheltered to a great degree by the high land towards the Durl Head.

On Friday Mr. Newman, chief boatman, came in to dinner with a disturbed face, and said as he rubbed some life into his chilled hands at the fire.

"We've just seen old No. XIX. going out, I suppose she left Salterne late last night."

"Well, what then, father?" said Mrs. Newman, looking up in surprise from the steaming stew she was pouring into a hot dish. "It was her turn out, wasn't it? Somebody said Steve Weld went yesterday morning, and old Dave was off Tuesday or Wednesday."

"That's right enough," said the coastguard. "But I wish they'd have stayed home a bit longer; I don't like the look of things, there's something bad coming."

"It's cold enough," answered Mrs. Newman comfortably, she was not an alarmist. "It's just bitter, I wonder you can stand there up top, father, the wind enough to cut you in two. I should think anybody would stay home if they could."

"The worse the weather is, the more the pilots are wanted," went on Newman, pursuing his own thoughts with an anxious brow, and disregarding the steaming plate of Irish stew before him. "I don't half like it. No. XIX. is not one to pin your faith to for soundness; I suppose the fair wind tempted them. I've been watching them this last hour, she's making a good run of it."

"But they won't die of cold, father, whatever do you worry so for? They're accustomed to all sorts; besides, likely enough they'll pick up ships coming in for shelter in no time, and be taken off."

Mrs. Newman was annoyed because her husband not only did not praise her stew, his favourite dinner, but did not even seem to be aware what he was eating. Presently he pushed away his plate.

"The wind's backing steadily," he said, "it's been chopping about for days. I hoped when we got it from the east yesterday that the spell was passing over, but it's backing south every hour."

"There was a little snow this morning," said his wife. "Just needle-points that seemed to prick you. I hate this weather myself."

The chief coastguard went to the door, picking up his glass as he passed the window seat.

"Arn't you going to have any pudding, father, I've a beautiful dumpling here?"

Newman shook his head. "Supper, Jenny; I can't wait now," and he disappeared with a smile back at his wife's troubled face.

"Supper," echoed Mrs. Newman scornfully. "That's just like a man, not to know that a suet dumpling's never the same warmed up. But there, it's father

all over, and I mustn't complain, I shouldn't love him so much if he put his dinner before poor fellows' lives."

Mr. Newman knew what he was saying when he prophesied danger. Before the short afternoon darkened into night, the wind was twice as strong as it had been in the morning; and evening descended in a pitch darkness made more dense by the sleet, half snow, half rain, that was driven up by the icy gale.

As night drew on the village did not sleep. Lights burned hour after hour in the cottage windows, and most of the men, muffled to the eyes, wandered from the shelter of the valley up to the exposed coast-guard station, with an uncertain anxious sense of sleepless expectation. Durlmouth was in for one of the periodical gales that raged once or twice each winter, with a force that none can realize who have not stood and watched.

Every hour the force of the wind grew, and when the sulky timid dawn crept out of the east to cast its cold grey light on the wild scene, the whole coastline for miles was one seething cauldron of maddened water. The heads to right and left loomed dimly. Grand, as they had stood through countless storms; buffeted, battered, shrieked at, and torn by the elements, unconscious types of a strong soul bearing the bitter blows of life's bad weather.

The coastguard searched the wild waste for signs of a sail. Far away on the horizon a big steamer travelled towards the home shelter, and huge as she was showed what was the force of the gale by her rolls and pitches.

Newman, the chief boatman, was the centre of an eager group; who, holding to the flagstaff, and keeping their feet as they best could, waited for news from the sea. These men were no mere fair-weather sailors, nor were they moved by curiosity only. Many a time had the coastguard-boat, a fine craft built with life-saving compartments, gone out to the help of some

coasting-vessel driving in on this dangerous shore, at the risk of their own lives. Not only the coast-guard themselves, but the ketch owners and working-men. Haynes, Mew, Kentfield and others, fathers of families who could be unjust and ungenerous to a rival, would risk their lives for strangers, for no man ever knew, when he earned his living by "going down to the sea," when his case might be the same, and when he might have to cry to God for the help of a friend.

Hourly the force of the storm grew, till it beat on the south coast with one of those gales that comes but once or twice in the course of the year, as a rule in January or March. Towards two o'clock in the afternoon the tide, which had been running up all the morning, turned, increasing the fury of the waves, and force of the wind many degrees. The tide at its height created a perfect maelstrom of water at the foot of the cliffs, where the little band of watchers stood. Every wave struck with a sound like heavy gun firing, and with each pounding blow a shower of spray leaped up, again and again falling on the bare cliff-top. There were tales told in the village that gales had been known when the waves had dashed over the cliff, sending showers of water into the valley; but the chief boatman had never seen that with his own eyes, though he said he could well believe it possible. Many were there who could remember the storm when the then chief boatman and all his crew were drowned in sight of the cove, on their way out to help a foundering coaster running on the rocks. The boat had capsized and seven men were battered and beaten to death almost under the eyes of wives and mothers. It was after that that the new boat was presented to the cove, built with lifeboat advantages, and she had been out once or twice, always successfully hitherto.

It was after two o'clock when Mr. Newman lowered

his glass and looked round at the waiting group with anxious eyes.

"Some of you see that the boat's ready to go out," he said, raising his voice to be heard above the shrieks of the wind and the boom and crash below.

"Anything running for the cove?" somebody asked, all the voices seemed blown away, but men pressed round the flagstaff and stared out into the wild waste.

The chief boatman nodded, his face was drawn and grey with the cold, and his deep-set eyes bloodshot. Some one else took the glass while he beat his numbed arms on his chest, and stamped up and down. The glass was handed on to another, and so on round the waiting band.

"It's so difficult to make her out," said Haynes, "she's half buried, but she's trying to make for the cove, whoever she is."

"If she don't make the cove she's about done for," said a young coastguard but recently transplanted from a calmer coast. "Nothing could weather Durl Head."

Mew disagreed, saying he'd seen worse than this even in his time. But no one took the hopeful view, and every one pressed round him who held the glass.

So passed twenty minutes or more; when the party on the cliff was gradually augmented by people from the village; more men, women and children too; who climbed the stiff ascent, and holding on to any support essayed to face and pierce the smother of howling wind and driving sleet that met them at the top. The news had gone round that Mr. Newman had ordered the boat to be in readiness. The women left their cottages and met in the road, holding shawls tightly over their heads, and all the men that were not on the cliff-top were seeing to the safety of boats in the creeks, where the water, violently agitated by the commotion outside, was heaving and tossing uneasily, and threatening damage on all sides.

Esther stood at the gate with a shawl over her head, listening and looking with a beating heart and a sense of nervous expectation. As she so stood Mrs. Fearey came down the road, bending to the wind even there, down in the shelter of the valley, between the winter hedges.

“ Oh, my dearie,” said the little woman, as she came up to Esther. “ There you are. I couldn’t rest, so I came along. Mary can’t leave Susan, and Trixie is taking care of them. But there, I can’t stay home, it’s like as though all the dear souls I’ve loved were calling me. So many, dear lass, the sea has taken.”

“ Have you been to sleep last night, Mrs. Fearey ? ” asked Esther, opening the gate with one hand and fastening it to prevent slamming, while she clutched her shawl with the other.

“ Sleep,” and the pilot’s widow made an expressive gesture. “ It’s like the storm my father went down in. He lost his life taking out the old boat to save drowning men ; that was before we had the new one.”

“ I heard them say, somebody called out that the boat was getting ready now,” said Esther in breathless tones. “ I went a little way down the road before ; one of the women was crying at her gate, I heard her say her husband would go if the boat went out.”

“ There’ll be more women than one crying to-morrow,” said Mrs. Fearey, her thin lips were set, but the tears stood in her bright eyes. “ Will you come to the station, dearie ; see them on the top, they’re looking at something. The dear Lord help us all.”

The two women climbed the steep. Esther’s strength hardly outstepping the wiry endurance of the other. They reached the top, and bending to keep a footing joined in the small crowd round the flagstaff.

No one noticed them, all eyes were fixed on the cauldron beyond, to which Mrs. Fearey and the girl also turned their eyes.

The short winter afternoon was already beginning to darken. No faintest ray of sun penetrated the thick driving clouds overhead ; which seemed to join and melt with the equally grey smother of sea, from which it was only divided on the horizon line by the teeth of breakers, and the dark swells of waves as they raced in from the open sea in endless succession.

With eyes long used to search the sea, and with the hereditary far sight of dwellers on the coast, Mrs. Fearey made out an object in the waste beyond, appearing and disappearing, upon which all eyes were now fixed.

The chief boatman kept the glass, the intensity of his watch but increasing the excitement of those who could see, but not distinguish, the struggling craft. Several questions were put, but not answered, every one waited from minute to minute with a certain dread of what should come. Suddenly a young man with keener sight than most, and perhaps less discretion, called out eagerly—

“There’s something on the sail, a number.”

A sort of groan shook the waiting crowd. The chief boatman lowered his glass, and looked round, his face was set and grim.

“It’s No. XIX.,” he said. “Come, you fellows, who’ll go with the boat.”

There was a rush and sway of eager men and talking ; in the excitement Esther found herself holding the glass, why, she could not remember afterwards, except that a wild desire to see took her, and she struggled to the front, not noticing how people fell away on seeing her face.

Her shawl was gone, torn away by the wrench of the mad wind, and she stood indifferent, reckless, feeling as though these dreadful things were happening to some one else a long time ago. The gale beat and tore at her as she stood adjusting the heavy glass; her long hair loosened from its fastenings flew out in

dusky strands, lashing round her head and arms, but she took no notice ; she thought only of one thing, to *see*. Some one helped her hold the glass, which she could not raise against the wind. Afterwards she knew it was young Dave, who had volunteered for the boat and been refused.

"Rest it on my shoulder, Esther," he said, with blue lips, and Esther did so, but she never knew that he spoke.

She looked through the glass, and saw a pilot-boat with her topmast gone, fighting for life out in the open bay. She could see the number on the main-sail, XIX.; the jib was flying in rags, and the bowsprit broken off short, the topmast-gear dragged and flapped against the cross-trees ; two figures were in the well holding the tiller.

The boat seemed to be half under water, every wave threatened to break over her as she laboured and struggled with heavy half-choked efforts. Rigid the girl stood, seeing the horrible drama brought so close and knowing it so far out of reach. She gave a hoarse cry as a huge following wave crashed on the stern ; the boat seemed to stop, sinking in a smother of foam. But a boat will battle for life like a human creature, and again she disentangled herself from the grasp of the enemy, rising feebly, her sprit gone, with the sail and gear encumbering the stern and dragging in the water. Esther saw a tall figure spring on to the stern and hack at the wreckage with something ; she thought the man had on a life-belt. The other figure seemed to drop the tiller and put both hands to his mouth as though to shout.

Another wave towering behind and above the stricken boat fell on the stern, poured into the well and swept the deck to a level with the raging surface of the wild sea. Esther saw but a mast and a tall powerful figure still hacking, keeping feet by a miracle. Once more the deck rose to the surface, and Esther

seemed to think that in that moment dark figures were appearing in the well from the cuddy within, but it was all over so quickly that she never knew quite how the end came.

Another wave, perhaps the seventh from its towering height, and the fighting creature was beaten to death at last. Tons of water must have poured over the broken hull, probably filling the cuddy, the hatch of which had been opened. The mast wavered, turned over and disappeared.

For a few seconds Esther continued staring at the raging whirlpool of grey sea and tossing foam; *nothing*, nothing but bits of wreckage, dark things appearing and disappearing, all that was left of perhaps nine lives.

For a few seconds she stared, then dropping her hold of the glass, which was caught by some one waiting in frenzy of eagerness, she turned round. Mrs. Fearey saw her face and pressed towards her.

"What, what!"

"Dead, dead, *all* dead." Esther shrieked the words in a voice not her own. "I saw—she went down." She pressed both hands over her wild eyes, and then spreading them out, beat the palms together in extreme of agony.

Mrs. Fearey said no word, but her small face seemed to sink together as she stood motionless.

Some of the women began to cry and sob; young Dave stood white-faced with trembling lips. The man who had clutched the glass dropped it heavily, and to questioning looks shook his head.

"Nothing, no. *Gone.*"

The turmoil of the raging waste continued as though unsatisfied, the wind shrieked round the group of white-faced people, huddled together staring, the heavy waves that had relentlessly dashed life out of brave men but a few moments before, still raced landwards, hurling themselves with a ceaseless boom

of horrible power against the changeless face of the blank black cliffs.

Esther stood for one moment, then she turned away and went quickly down the steep slope towards the village, noting nothing of the wind that tore her long hair, or the sleet that drenched her shawless shoulders.

Mrs. Fearey followed, suddenly old. She shook her head when some one offered to help her, and crept down the hill alone also. The rest of the group looked after her with a certain reverence and awe, for had not she lost the last link that tied her to earth, standing now alone, a widow, childless, without kith or kin. Then they scattered and scrambled away down by any path, eager to get first and see what was happening to the volunteers for the boat.

They found that it had actually put out and was attempting to cross the breakers at the mouth of the cove, in imminent danger of capsize. Again and again the trial had been made to no purpose, the boat had to wait and back. Just as the stragglers from the cliffs reached the rocks on the village side of the horseshoe, the boat made a gallant rush, plunging into the crest of an incoming breaker. For a moment it seemed as though she would get through, but the force of the sea was overpowering, and broadside on she was swept back into the cove, her crew clinging to the thwarts, and half full of water, driven back along the way she had come.

The chief boatman was not beaten yet, and no man thought of giving in, but shouts and signs from the shore stayed the intention. At first they would not believe, but when they who were willingly offering their lives understood at last, they pulled back to the boat-house and stepped ashore, white and silent.

Esther hurried on homewards, her brain in a curious maze. It can hardly be said that she felt, and tears would have been impossible to her. The pilot's widow followed her closely, even at such a moment unselfish

in her grief, and full of growing anxiety for the girl whose face she had seen turning from that last scene.

Coming along the road was Michael, troubled at their absence, and disturbed, even with his life's experience, at the fury of the gale.

Esther ran on till she met him, and then stopping in the middle of the road, put her long wet hair out of her eyes and looked at him.

"Steve's dead," she said in a harsh tone.

Carne made some dazed exclamation; she went on twisting the hair absently round her fingers.

"I saw him drown. I saw them all drown."

"Esther," cried Michael, the colour of his face fading to unnatural pallor.

She looked at him stupidly, and Mrs. Fearey came up with them. The ketch owner turned to the new-comer.

"What does she say, ma'am? It's not true."

"It's true, Michael Carne." Her voice was very quiet, and she drew the shawl round her with hands that trembled.

"Then—then, *you*——" The man stopped, words failing him to express what broke on his mind.

"Yes," said Mrs. Fearey, "my Steve." There was a choked pause, and a tear, the difficult tear of old age crept down the wrinkled cheek.

"God have mercy on us," exclaimed Michael, passing his hand over his eyes.

"His will be done now, and always," said the little woman bravely, and she wiped the tears.

There was silence for a minute, but for the rushing of the wind, creak of boughs, and rustle of driven twigs and leaves. Michael looked with a certain awe at the little figure, bent and shrivelled, yet so full of dignity, he did not know what to say.

"Better get the child indoors." Mrs. Fearey spoke first. "She had the glass, and—and saw. It's struck her to the heart, she's not herself."

Esther submitted to be led home. The expression of her face did not change, she looked round the kitchen with a sort of dull strangeness, sat down on the edge of a chair, and began slowly to wring the long rope of hair that she had twisted up with both hands.

"See how wet," she said.

Mrs. Fearey looked at the girl anxiously, and setting aside her own grief with the generous unselfishness peculiar to her, she quietly put on the kettle and moved about getting tea, followed by Michael helping with shaking hands.

"Don't take notice of her." Mrs. Fearey made a gesture towards the quiet figure on the chair. "We'll get her to bed as soon as possible ; it's the shock."

"Why should you give up hope, ma'am?" said Michael suddenly.

"Dear man," answered the little woman, with a faint smile, "the boat, No. XIX., went down before our eyes, running for the cove."

"It doesn't follow Steve hadn't been taken off," persisted Michael, the idea growing in his mind. "They went out early yesterday, wasn't it? They must have met some vessel running in. How do you know Steve hasn't been put aboard some one of them?"

A faint flush stole over Mrs. Fearey's white face, her lips quivered. But Michael had raised his voice in the energy of the thought, and before she could speak Esther's voice broke in—

"I saw Steve on the stern cutting away at the broken mizzen. I saw him plain enough, no one about was so tall and big." She spoke without expression or emotion, and the flush died out of Mrs. Fearey's face leaving it whiter than before.

Michael turned hastily, but the girl was staring at her hands lying in her lap, and said no more. The tea was a farce, except in the case of Esther, who drank thirstily with a pre-occupied air.

Mrs. Fearey took no notice, talking to Michael

now and again, little disjointed sentences that told the tale of the tragedy.

Afterwards they sat round the fire silently, sometimes a word passing between Michael and the pilot's widow, while the wind shook the cottage and wailed down the valley with the cry of many despairing souls in their last agony out on wild waste of sea.

Presently Mrs. Fearey said to Esther—

"Come to bed, lass, you're tired."

Esther rose obediently. Michael put his arm round her tenderly and raised her chin to look into her eyes; she looked back at him with the expression of a sleep-walker.

"Poor daddie," she said, with a little smile; "how's your leg?"

Michael muttered something and kissed her, there were tears in his eyes as he watched her leave the room. Mrs. Fearey went up with her, and presently coming down again reported that she was in bed and had said nothing.

"And now I'll go home, Mr. Carne, if there's no more I can do."

"God bless you, ma'am," said the master of *Brown Bird*, with a sudden keen sense of reverence for the little lonely woman who stood before him so broken, and yet so faithful to her faith; "and He will bless you for that matter. You're a good woman."

"It's cruelly hard to say, 'His will be done,' sometimes, Michael Carne." Mrs. Fearey paused, controlling her voice. "We couldn't if it wasn't for *Him*. Good-night to you."

Michael took her to the gate, he would have gone home with her, but she waved him back, and he saw the little figure disappear in the dark alone. After sitting awhile quietly, his mind full of strange thoughts, Carne went softly up-stairs. Before he entered his own room he peeped round Esther's door. She was sleeping heavily, and moaning faintly in her sleep.

CHAPTER XV

THE SEA GIVES UP HER DEAD

OWARDS three o'clock in the morning, twelve hours after the wreck of the pilot's boat, Esther Carne awoke, and sat up in bed. The wind had abated something of its frenzy, though it still blew hard ; but the roar of the waves was insistent and angry, and a cold rain pattered in little showers against the casement.

Esther sat for a while with her elbows on her knees and chin resting on her hands, then she got up and dressed herself, with very little noise, and crept downstairs in stockinged feet. She unfastened the door carefully, closed it behind her, and went out into the darkness and rain, turned without hesitation towards the Rockhampton road, and hurried on with fleet steps regardless of her shoeless condition.

She passed the two cottages, observing vaguely that there was a light burning in Mrs. Fearey's kitchen, and a little further on opened the gate into the fields, and turned on to the cliff, speeding over the rough ground and making straight for the Rocky Cove.

There was little thought passing through her dazed brain, except a curious conviction that if Stephen were alive he would come there to meet her, and dead, would know she was there. She ran down the steep, broken ground at a pace that would probably have caused an accident had she been in her normal state, but like a sleep-walker she was protected by her own reckless sense of security ; arrived on the sandy beach she looked round.

The tide, which had been running out with all its volume at the time of the wreck, had continued to ebb for some five hours afterwards, and then, turning,

had flowed for six hours, reaching an unusual height, from the fact that it was the season of spring tide, and that the wind had tended to its reaching a higher line than usual even then.

The upper beach was strewn with debris of many kinds—wood, and piles of ragged brown seaweed, broken lobster-pots, and all the playthings of the storm. Esther looked about, at first seeing little in the darkness, but gradually growing accustomed to the dim grey reflection from the sea, which shed a sort of light of its own.

The water was retreating, and as it went it left behind the traces of its passionate madness. More sand had been heaped up round the base of the fallen rocks, and the aspect of the bay even seemed in a manner changed.

Esther wandered about uncertain; she was wet and cold, only the remnants of stockings remained on her bruised feet, but she did not notice; the angry moan of the retiring waves seemed to fascinate her, and she followed them down from rock to rock absorbed in the occupation.

Something was drifting heavily in the grasp of the water power—a long dark shape. It might be a log of wood, perhaps the piece of a mast. One moment quite covered, the next almost exposed, it turned and dragged heavily in the sand. Esther saw it first without much speculation, but presently she thought of nothing else, and her heart set itself intently on the one idea of keeping this prey from the destroyer. She ran into the water, and stooping, seized it, but the weight was too great and it was dragged from her hands. But after a few minutes the water left it, sweeping down the beach, sucking sand and pebbles with a long rasping sound, and the heavy plaything lay still, but for the slight slide of moving sand beneath it.

Esther exerted all her strength to move it, or turn

it over ; to no purpose, she was weak, and the heavy body was embedded face downwards in sand, shingle, and seaweed.

It was dressed in long oilskins and heavy boots to the thighs, a sou'-wester was tied down over the head, and a life-belt encircled the waist. After one or two more strenuous efforts she desisted, and, crouching down on the heaped-up shingle, waited till somebody should come.

Michael Carne awoke soon after she had left the house, with a sense of anxiety and worry in his mind. He got up and looked out of the little window ; the wind had fallen and rain was beating on the pane. It occurred to him to go and look at Esther, for returning consciousness brought back to his mind a keen pang of anxiety about her condition. Softly he opened her door and looked in ; Esther was not there ; the bed was tumbled, and the room empty. Her father looked round the little place, taking in with a quick eye that her clothes were gone, but not her shoes or hat, which lay on a chair. Hurriedly putting on some clothing, with more expedition than he had used since his accident, he went down-stairs ; looked first in the wash-house and kitchen, then round the garden, and finally limped away in the direction of the two cottages as fast as his stiff ankle would allow.

"She might have gone to Mrs. Fearey," he muttered to himself, and in his pre-occupation almost ran against some one coming the other way.

"Hallo," said the man, a coastguard, dressed for bad weather, coming quickly from the Rockhampton side.

Carne stopped. "You haven't seen any one about, have you ?" asked Carne anxiously.

The man shook his head. "Not a night to be out," he said. "I met my mate the other side of Rocky Cove, usual time ; came back along the edge up there ;

it was about as much as you could do to stand, but the worst's over now. Who are you looking for, Mr. Carne?"

"My daughter," answered the Cornishman, with a little hesitation; he hated making his private affairs public.

The sailor gave a little exclamation of dismay and surprise.

"And if it's not rude to ask, how does it come she should be out this time?"

"Were you on the cliff, time that No. XIX. went down?" said Michael, answering with another question.

"I was in the boat trying to get off to them," said the coastguard.

"Ah, then, you didn't see it happen. *She* did."

"What! your daughter saw the boat go down!"

"I understand she got hold of the glass when the volunteers went for the boat, and it happened that she saw it all. She keeps saying she saw them drown; her mind's all upset, her head's queer in some way; she got out of bed and went out; how long ago I don't know. I'm looking for her." The account came in disjointed fashion, Carne's anxiety battling with his natural reserve.

The coastguard considered.

"You've no notion where she'd go?"

Michael shook his head impatiently.

"She wouldn't know herself, her mind's all upset."

There was a pause; then the sailor said—

"When I went through the gate from the road up there"—nodding his head towards two cottages—"on to the cliff, it was shut, firm shut, and I shut it behind me. When I come back that way a few minutes since it was open, and the wind had swung it back. Now I don't see who could have gone through in the night, unless——"

"It must have been her," interrupted Michael, with

impulsive eagerness. "She's gone that way, gone on to the cliff. Thank you, I'm much obliged; I'd better be off after her."

He was hurrying away when the sailor detained him by a gesture.

"Shan't you want any one to come with you?"

"I don't see why I should, I can find her alone." There was a little rebuff in his manner, but the generous-hearted sailor was not to be easily put off.

"Don't know so much about that," he said cheerfully, "she might be ill. My turn's up, I must just go along and report, and then I'll come back this way and follow you. You go on to Rocky Cove, like enough you'll find her thereabouts," and he went off at a trot before Michael had time to refuse, or even reply.

He went on, to a certain extent relieved by the friendly sympathy, and reached two cottages, to find a little light burning behind the kitchen blind as Esther had noticed.

He tapped at the door, and it was almost immediately opened by Mrs. Fearey with Trixie at her heels. The bright eyes met Michael's with wild question for a moment. "*News*, was it possible?" It cut his heart to have nothing to say, and he saw the shadow fall with a sympathy too keen to express.

"Ma'am," he said, with something of a woman's quick intuition as to what would best heal the grief he saw. "Ma'am, I want your kind help."

"If there's anything I can do, Michael Carne;" and the pilot's widow set her own sorrow in the background.

"There is, ma'am, if you will. My girl's gone out somewhere, and I want to find her." He put it as quietly as possible, but all Mrs. Fearey's excitement was ablaze at once.

"What! Esther out! Poor maid; it's the brain wandering. And have you any notion which way she may be gone?"

Michael mentioned his meeting with the coastguard, and Mrs. Fearey listened, nodding vehemently.

"I've known her go to the cove again and again. There was something in her mind, poor lass. I'm ready, I'm ready, Mr. Carne; likely enough you *will* need me to help you with her; a man's not the same as a woman if he's twenty times a girl's father. But whatever shall I do with Baby, he'll fret so alone, and he's very much upset to-night, too?" her sharp voice was very tender.

"Bring him along too," suggested Michael. "If he's not too stiff to walk, he'll be a help, perhaps. See now, sheep-dog nature is to look for lost sheep; he might lead us, there's no knowing."

"Come then, Trixie, boy, and help us find Esther," cried Mrs. Fearey, stooping to pat the grey head pressed lovingly against her knee; and the old dog answered with his short husky bark as his intelligence gathered that something was expected from him.

It was bitterly cold and windy, the driving rain very penetrating and continuous, increasing steadily in its fall as the wind fell and the tide went down. Mrs. Fearey pinned on her shawl, and tied a large silk handkerchief over her hat, and the three started—a strange trio. The old dog shambling in front, full of excitement, appearing to know exactly what was required of him. Michael's long figure bending to the wind, limping, but forgetful of discomfort. And the little woman talking and encouraging the dog, while she held in her hand a small lantern well protected against draughts.

They passed through the gate and bent their steps towards the rough stretch of cliff top. There was no doubt that Trixie understood, by some strange instinct, that they were following Esther. He sniffed about with husky barks, trotting to and fro, and led them, if they had known, almost in the girl's footmarks to the edge of Rocky Cove. Then, after worrying up and

down for a minute or two, he began to descend the broken slope.

Mrs. Fearey followed without hesitation, talking to and encouraging the dog with an incessant little running fire of comment and suggestion. Michael came last, his heart beating with a very torture of anxiety. They heard Trixie's scuffling slide down the loose shingle at the bottom ; then a quick series of joyous barks, insistent, triumphant ; then a moment's silence, followed by a long, trembling howl.

"Oh, merciful Lord!" whispered the little woman to herself, and Michael's breath was strangled in his choking throat.

They were over the tumbling shingle, pattering across the wet sand, slipping on wet seaweed, tripping over strange wreckage. Something was before them, and out of the shadow came another long wail from the old dog.

"Good boy, good Trixie," cried Mrs. Fearey, her voice shaking with dread ; and the dog ran back to her with a bark of triumph.

Something tall rose quietly out of the shadow before them. Esther! Mrs. Fearey's lantern fell on her soaking dress, ghastly face, dull eyes, and long dark hair, that clung to her shoulders like strands of brown seaweed.

"Is that you, daddie?" she said rather faintly, as though from exhaustion. "I was waiting for you to come and help me move him."

"*Him*," Michael could hardly speak the word.

"Yes—Steve," said the girl, without emotion. "He's come in from the sea ; I thought he would, that's why I came here."

Carne sprang forward as he heard Mrs. Fearey's stifled cry, and knelt down by the long heavy body that the sand was sheltering so securely.

Mrs. Fearey set down the lantern, and with nervous strength helped the Cornishman in his effort. Esther

stood by motionless, looking down at them, her arms hanging listlessly at her side.

The quiet figure was moved, lifted over, and gently rested against the heap of drifted sand. The oilskin hat slipped back; they saw a grey beard, a still, dignified face, lined by five-and-sixty years of facing death, asleep with the grand peace of those who have believed and been faithful.

Michael rose slowly, with his hat in his hand.

"Old Dave Occomore," he said in an awestruck voice. "God rest him!"

And Mrs. Fearey, looking down at her old friend's last sleep, said in her brave, faithful voice, as one who knew, "For, if we believe Jesus died and rose again, even so, them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."

The difficult tears ran slowly over her wrinkled cheeks, but she did not weep as "one without hope." Esther stood still staring at the quiet figure.

Michael went to her and drew her into his arms, pressing her white face against his breast, and stroking her head with gentle caresses. She was trembling from head to foot.

"My maid, my own maid; don't you grieve so, it's not Steve."

Esther sank in his arms a dead weight, she had fainted without a murmur.

Little lights began to twinkle on the top of the rough ground, and Michael, holding Esther in his arms, answered back a long call to the distant shouts. His voice was carried shorewards by the wind, and in a few moments they were joined by a party of eight or ten men with lanterns and sticks.

There was a hurried explanation; and in a few more minutes the same men were struggling up the broken slope with stretchers improvised out of sticks and oilskin coats on which lay the senseless form of Esther Carne, and the quiet body of the brave old

pilot. The former was carried into her father's cottage as the winter dawn began to creep into the valley, while the slow tramp of the sailors bearing their mate's body, faded into silence down the village road.

Mrs. Fearey and Michael laid the girl on the sofa and chafed her hands with spirit, while the old dog looked on eagerly, conscious of keen responsibility, and happy in praise from his mistress.

After a time Esther opened her eyes and looked round, there was more sense and speculation in her glance; she looked quietly at Mrs. Fearey, then turned her eyes on her father who was bending over her with deep lines of anxiety marking his haggard, unshaven face.

After a minute's quiet contemplation, she said weakly—

"He can never know now—never—*never*."

"Who can't know, my maid?" said Carne, regardless of a little gesture of warning from Mrs. Fearey; he was thinking more of his daughter than the meaning of her words.

"Steve, dad." The name came like a sigh of pain from her lips; then raising herself on her elbow, and looking into her father's eyes, she went on, "I'd begun to think, somehow, that he cared about me, but I wouldn't think because—because of the miller—and the house, and all that. But, dad, I came to want him to love me—and last time when he came home he never came here, and then I thought he'd made up his mind to get over it, if he ever had cared; while there was time I'd never thought; when I began to think he didn't want me. Dad—I never felt till it was too late! and now—he's dead—dead, I can never tell him—he can never know how I loved him!"

Her voice rose to almost a cry, she spoke quicker and more feverishly.

Michael knelt on one knee by the side of the sofa and took her hands, which were moving with excited gestures.

"Don't, my lass, don't you take on so ; you'll make yourself very ill."

"If I don't tell you I shall die," said the girl, pressing his hands against her hot forehead. "Daddie, I never knew—I never *thought* what it was to love anybody as though you couldn't live without them. It came all in a minute—not the love—but *knowing* about it; the day I knew he was back. Last time. And a girl can't show a man—but a *very* little." Her lips began to tremble and her voice was strangling in her throat as she went on with effort. "And then—he never came—or spoke to me—and I saw he didn't want me ; perhaps he thought I had no heart because of—of the miller."

Michael tried to stop her with "hushes" and gentle words, but she shook her head wildly.

"I know I wasn't half good enough for Steve—he was different—from everybody—the *truest*—Oh, dad, hold me, or I shall go mad ! I *can't* bear it !"

Michael held her while the tears ran down his cheeks ; never before had he seen Esther shaken so to the soul, and her agony of grief cut him as no grief of his own could have done. In face of this reality of suffering his own morbid tendency to magnify worries dropped from him, and all the tenderness and sympathy in his really fine nature came into play.

Esther stroked his face with one of her pretty loving gestures.

"I've been a selfish, heartless brute to you, my girl. I might have prevented it all, if I hadn't been so set on my own way."

She shook her head with a faint smile, and leaning against him quietly looked at Mrs. Fearey, who had been standing at the end of the sofa, waiting.

"Let me help you up to bed, my dear," said the little woman gently. "Come along, Mr. Carne; there'll be two of you ill directly. She's got to stay abed this next day or two, and the sooner she goes to sleep the better."

Purposely the brave little woman made her voice brisk and matter-of-fact; realizing that both father and daughter were of such excitable temperament as to need the tonic of commonplace. Michael rose obediently, and Esther struggled to her feet with his help. Trixie jumped round stiffly at this evidence of recuperation; he had been looking on at the scene with troubled eye; and Esther bent to pat him with a little laugh that was almost a sob, and did not deceive Trixie as a sign of gaiety.

When the girl was once more safely in bed she lay still, staring with wide, hopeless eyes at the watery dawn that stole in through the little casement.

"I only hope you won't get a rheumatic fever," said Mrs. Fearey, troubled over the heap of wet clothing.

"Was I wet?" said Esther simply.

"*Was* I wet!" there was much assumed scorn and indignation in the echo. "Well, go to sleep."

Mrs. Fearey was leaving the room, when the girl's voice arrested her.

"Mrs. Fearey, should you mind if Baby stayed here a bit with me—would he?"

"He may if he will," said the little woman, greeting this request with pleasure as a sign of return to balance of mind. "Here, Trixie, boy, will you stay and take care of Esther a bit?"

The sheep-dog looked with questioning eye from one to the other.

"He may stay on the foot of the bed," said Esther, "he won't hurt the counterpane."

Mr. Fearey exclaimed in horror—

"Why, he'd think the world was come to an end if

he was let sit on a bed, would Trixie. He was never brought up in careless ways. No, he likes a chair like he sees his mother sit. Here's a cushion he can't harm," and Mrs. Fearey tossed up Esther's little flock cushion covered with washing cretonne, and arranged it in the chair by her bedside. "He's pretty stiff," she said, with some pride, "but it's wonderful how he manages to get on a chair—habit, that's what it is."

Trixie realized that it was required of him to remain, and he clambered on to the cushion with polite tail wags, but a yearning eye fixed on his mistress.

"Just for a bit, lad," whispered the old woman, as to a friend that understood. "Don't you let self get the better of you; we've all got to put it behind sometimes. Now you take care of Esther till she goes to sleep."

The faithful grey head turned to follow her as she left the room, then with a little distressful whine the old dog laid his nose on his paws, and settled into an attitude of patience, the wakeful eye fixed on Esther.

The girl stretched out a weak hand and laid it on his shaggy back; soon afterwards her eyelids drooped and she slept heavily, while Trixie listened anxiously with raised ear, and eye on the door.

The storm had worn itself out. Exactly twenty-four hours after the wreck of No. XIX. pilot-boat, the sun struggled through the breaking clouds, and the sullen water, as if tired of its own violence, began the ebb tide with a doleful retreat of creeping waves, back over the whispering shingle.

The rain was over and gone, and blue sky, the dull, far-away blue of January was everywhere showing itself through the clouds that drifted away northwards in torn fragments.

All Durlmouth village was collected on the east side of the cave, beyond the eastern horn of the entrance, where the sweep of sand and shingle

curving round and out to the Durl Head had long earned the name of Deadman's Bay, because, owing probably to the sweep of the strong tides between the two great heads, so many wrecked vessels and bodies of those lost at sea came ashore there.

As the second tide after the wreck began to retreat, it was reported from the coastguard station that that for which they had waited was come ; and men and women alike crowded awestruck over the eastern down by the steep cliff paths to the flat shore to wait. The receding waves had left their prey on the sands. The long black hull lay helplessly on its side ; mast gone, bowsprit gone, rudder gone. The little waves played round the shining keel, as though loth to leave No. XIX. after the cruel game they had played with her and hers. Just before four o'clock the sun sank beyond Black Rock Bill to the westward, and the clearing sky flamed into a wonder of rosy light, the scudding clouds became wreaths of saffron-coloured smoke, and long fingers of light trailed across the stretch of water and touched the wet sand, turning the little ponds left by the tide into the likeness of pools of blood, and glistening with yellow shine of glory on the wet hull of the pilot-boat.

The coastguard boarded the wreck, while the little crowd stood at a distance awestruck. In less than a minute the chief boatman stepped ashore again, and the word was passed for stretchers. The men waited round the hull with hats off, and every face bore the imprint of what they had seen and what they felt. The women cried quietly, and the children played about, finding little crabs left behind by the water, and rejoicing much over strange shells thrown up from the sea-world.

One by one the bodies were lifted reverently out, drowned in the cuddy ; some sheltering, some probably asleep after the hard night. Five were there, fathers of families, Salterne-men, all well known in Durlmouth.

One of the cuddy doors was still securely fastened, and the other, which might have been open at the time of the wreck, had shut to afterwards, thus apparently keeping the bodies imprisoned.

The slow procession wound across the flat sands again and again (for they had but two stretchers). The children stopped in their play to stare, and the women followed wiping their eyes with their shawls and aprons.

Up the rough path to the gate of the cove, and there the bodies were laid carefully in the coastguard boat, and rowed across the basin to the quay, to save carrying them over the steep pitch over the down.

The sun sank lower and lower behind the Black Rock, which stood in relief against the glow like a purple spur running out into the grey sea. The pink glow faded to saffron, and the saffron to a cold mauve. The sea retreated whispering, and long shadows fell over the lonely sands.

About the time that the last light left the sky Esther awoke and remembered everything.

CHAPTER XVI

ESTHER AWAKES



IX out of the seven pilots were accounted for. There remained only Stephen Weld and the two men who were employed to take the boat back when all the pilots were put off.

Night and day the whole line of coastguard watched the shore; and on the second day a body was washed up beyond Rockhampton almost unrecognizable, but no more news came from the sea, and as

the days went by the searchers lost hope of any further trace.

The faint hope that may have lingered in Mrs. Fearey's heart, that Stephen had been taken off first, died away as the days passed without news ; because, had he been alive he would most surely have written or sent a message.

Esther kept her bed almost a week, lying still with her face towards the window, and slow tears creeping down her white cheeks. She spoke little, and ate hardly anything ; she did not seem to notice her father's worn face, or Mrs. Fearey's gentle efforts to interest her ; she took no notice of the housekeeping either, and Carne struggled alone with its details, too anxious about her to press these matters on her notice.

At the end of a week she came down, looking taller and very thin. She was indefinably altered ; the girlhood had gone from her face, and suffering womanhood looked from her sad eyes. Even the shape of her face had changed, the temples had hollowed, and the smooth curve of her cheeks had gone. A slight stoop of the neck increased the appearance of delicacy ; and Carne watched her movements, so slow and spiritless, with keen pain, as he remembered the young mother who had " gone off in a decline " with much the same look as her child had now.

In the course of the next few days Mr. Emmett came to the cottage. He had called once or twice to ask after Esther, but she shrank when his name was mentioned, and had never mentioned it herself since the night she was brought home.

The miller had heard some rumour of her night adventure, but being of a very practical nature he had set it aside as the consequence of shock to the nerves. He considered it foolish for a man to trouble about one wreck more or less, but was not displeased that Esther had shown so much sensibility, as women, in

the miller's opinion, were the better for a little weakness.

When Esther was down-stairs she could not escape his visit, and Michael watched her anxiously as the well-known rap sounded on the cottage door. He opened it, for she was sitting by the fire, and only turned her head slightly at the sound.

Mr. Emmett came in, and sat down with an air of possession and authority that set Esther's highly-strung nerves on edge at once.

"Glad to see you down, Esther. A step in the right direction, eh? A little good wine will do wonders, Carne. She looks pulled down, I can't allow that."

"Thank you, sir, you're very kind," Esther turned away her eyes from the miller's searching glances. "But I don't want anything."

"Oh, nonsense," said Mr. Emmett, with his own tone of authority. "We shall have you well and strong again in no time, with a little common-sense—and careful feeding." He rose, and putting his chair on the same side of the hearth as hers, sat down beside her.

Esther got up, and crossing the hearthrug stood quietly at the corner of the fire-place with her hand on the mantelpiece. She faced the miller, and the light from the window fell full on her white face and deep sad eyes.

"If you please, sir," she said, her voice trembling a little, "there is something I would like to say to you."

"Certainly," said Mr. Emmett, "say whatever you like," he rose too and faced her, with a flush mounting to his florid face.

"It's this, then——" Esther paused with a little dryness of the throat, "*I can never marry you*," then quicker, as though to make her refusal softer and less abrupt, "You're very kind, you've been good to

dad, I thank you very much. But I can never marry you now."

There was a silence in the cottage only broken by the settling down of the fire in the little grate, and a fall of red-hot cinders; then the miller said without any emotion or apparent annoyance—

"And since when they—you made up your mind to this foolish course?"

"I have known I did not—not care for you—a long time," said the girl hesitating.

Mr. Emmett brushed aside this weak suggestion with a gesture of contempt.

"I thought you had more sense, Esther, than to talk about 'caring for' a person, as though you were some foolish romantic school-girl. Surely you understand the practical advantages, and you must know too that I should do all in my power to make you thoroughly comfortable and happy."

"I couldn't be happy—if I didn't love you," said the girl, raising her head; and the miller saw a new light in her soft eyes and a new expression in the droop of her plaintive mouth.

"This is childish folly," exclaimed Mr. Emmett, with rising temper.

Michael stood by with his arms folded, and brows bent on the two; but he said nothing.

"Rubbish," went on Mr. Emmett, "sentiment and *rubbish*, to throw away a large income, property, every advantage. Do you love any one else?"

There was a certain tone of insolence in his voice, and Esther drew herself together, raising her head and looking back across the hearthrug at the angry man with something of her old self.

"Yes—I do," she said. "I love Stephen Weld."

The miller stared; then he gave a short rough laugh.

"Why this is still more romantic. The man has been drowned more than a week."

Esther shivered as though she had been struck with a whip-lash. Michael gave a little exclamation and moved nearer to her.

"That makes no difference," she said. Her voice was low and strained, and she put out a hand and slid it through her father's arm. "If dad will keep me with him, I shall never want anybody else now."

The miller laughed again, the little veins in his forehead were swelled, and his eyes looked more prominent than usual.

"I never heard greater folly. 'Never want any one else.' Look here, Carne, are you going to countenance this romantic madness, and allow your daughter to throw away every worldly advantage because she fancies she is in love with a dead man?"

Then Michael spoke for the first time, and all the weakness of hesitation had gone from him.

"My girl must do as her heart leads her, sir. No money is worth a broken heart; she shan't marry where she doesn't love, as long as I've hands to work and a roof to cover her."

There was a pause, Esther pressed the arm she leaned on, and Michael patted her fingers lovingly. Then the miller said, and there was a little dry disagreeable sneer in his tone—

"That sounds all very fine, and almost as romantic as Esther's notions. But if your hands can't get the work, and if the roof doesn't stay over your head, there's more smoke than fire about it, eh?"

Michael drew himself up, there was a little contempt in his refined dark face.

"You know my difficulties, sir. But that doesn't give you a right to throw it in my face. The boat's there, and I can work as well as another man—as for the house, it's not gone yet, and I'll find a way of keeping it somehow."

Mr. Emmett made no answer to this. He seemed to wish to say more, and yet to check the desire.

He looked at Esther, then from her to Michael, and tapped his boot with his stick.

Neither father nor daughter spoke. Presently the miller broke the silence.

"January, isn't it? Six months is not long to make up fifty pounds, Carne; don't you think you'd better consider this."

"I can't go against my girl's feelings, sir." Carne liked the miller, and therefore spoke with a desire to conciliate. "I don't deny that I should have been glad if she could have cared for you enough to marry you, but it isn't right to go against her heart; nothing but trouble comes of a woman marrying for money."

"You're a fool," said Mr. Emmett dryly. "And as I have made it a practice all my life never to argue with fools, we'll say no more. I think you'll be sorry," he gave a little laugh, and there was a sound in it that made Esther raise her eyes and regard him searchingly. "I think you'll both be very sorry—when the time comes." He moved towards the door, opened it, and stood looking at them with the latch in his hand. His eyes met Esther's, perhaps she had never before looked more beautiful and refined; the miller's intense desire to win this girl for his wife overpowered his anger and annoyance, and he spoke again.

"*I shall not marry, Esther. I tell you plainly that you won't find another man in a hurry who would do as well by you and give you all that I would. Perhaps now you think you can't agree to it because all this business is fresh in your mind; but if you look at the matter sensibly, you must see that it's a silly idea for a young woman to throw away all her chances in life for the sake of a romantic notion. I don't care for romance and sentiment myself, it's a poor sort of thing to depend on for a living; money and comfort is better worth having. You'll find it so yourself—when the shoe pinches.*" He paused.

Carne looked at Esther, the miller's words, spoken so temperately, had made an impression on his sympathetic nature. But Esther's decision was not an impulse, and her expression did not change. Neither of the men realized that her woman's heart had awakened, too late for its own happiness perhaps but not too late to be true to itself.

She shook her head with a little smile; it was not possible to argue, or explain the matter, no one could understand but herself.

"You say so now," went on Mr. Emmett in a tolerant tone. "I am not a man that changes his mind; what I say I mean, what I want I usually get. When you think better of it, and make up your mind to use common-sense, your father can tell me, or, better still, you can tell me yourself."

Carne made as though to speak, but Mr. Emmett waved his hand with a gesture as setting aside discussion.

"No; that's all I have to say, except this, which you may as well note because you'll find it's true when the time comes. Money is easier to spend than to get; once you let yourself in for debt you'll find it gets a grip on you not easily unloosed. You may be romantic, but you won't find that mortgages are romantic, business is business. Good-day to you, Carne. Good-day, Esther," and putting on his hard square felt hat the miller departed, looking round at the garden as he went, in the way that had always annoyed Esther; to-day she did not notice it.

For a minute or more there was silence, then Esther sighed wearily, and drawing her arm from her father's turned back to her chair and sat down. Her action was quite unlike her usual self, absorbed, indifferent, grief had made her self-centred. Michael watched her for a moment, and then quietly set about getting dinner, while the girl sat still and stared at the fire.

This was only the beginning of many days alike, and Michael Carne's patience was the patience of love. He forgot himself and his grievances, and in his care to shield Esther from trouble, really did harm to a condition which should have been roused from its egotism of sorrow.

The weeks slipped by and Esther's soul still slept in a trance of brooding grief; regardless of time, of the patient tenderness by her side, of the necessities of life. She had begun doing her daily work again from habit merely; but there was no life or interest in what she did, and when it was done she sat with idle hands and sad eyes dreaming, rousing herself with a sigh when Michael spoke to her.

She went in the boat once, but her drawn face and set mouth showed what she was suffering, and so her father did not ask her to go again; but, setting aside again his own pleasure, went alone with young Dave, pretending he would rather Esther did not come till the weather was warmer; and she stayed behind with a look of relief, hardly conscious how long he was away, taking it all indifferently.

The last week in February he took his turn in a journey to Rockhampton. Esther saw him go with a faint stirring of her old solicitous anxiety. It was a spring day, a day such as we often see at the end of winter before the cold spring winds shrivel the earth again. The air was full of soft fresh scents, and the anxious twittering of birds; that soft twitter that seems to express an awakening of responsibility in the matter of housekeeping.

She stood at the door leaning her head against the frame, and regarding the surroundings with more interest than she had felt for many weeks. Down each side of the path to the gate a tiny line of drooping white bells had sprung into being; Esther did not remember them yesterday, or perhaps she had not noticed them? Behind them again an array

of delicate shoots showed that the crocuses were not asleep. She wandered down the path looking at them, and from there round the garden, so long neglected. If Miser Tewkesbury could have seen it, he would probably have rightly concluded that his legacy had been left to itself. Fortunately winter months did not so much matter, but even so the brown earth had not been turned, and the refuse of late autumn clogged the ground still. Esther felt ashamed as she looked at it.

Then the bees, almost forgotten, were beginning to stir. One and one crawled out and back again; the big lilac bushes and the old laburnums that swung golden banners round the cottage were beginning also to stretch and stir after the winter rest.

"Summer, summer," said Esther to herself, but with the very words came a pang of memory, a rush of thoughts. Summer without hope of seeing Stephen, long days without hearing his voice! All the valley awake in golden warmth, and away at the cove sleepy blue water creeping up over the little sand ridges, and no Stephen to see it. No tall figure coming from Salterne way, no deep voice to answer her after a little consideration in the thoughtful way that was one of Stephen's characteristics. It occurred to Esther now, thinking it over, that the reason why he had always looked so seriously, and answered her lightest words in almost a tone of reverence, was because every word she ever uttered had been to him different from other women's words. Every hour they had spent together had been reviewed again and again by the girl in her long brooding hours, and the thought that he loved her was nursed in her most secret consciousness as a thought too sacred for outward expression. While curiously enough Mrs. Fearey had never mentioned this fact to the girl, because she took it so entirely for granted that Esther must know; not realizing the simplicity of nature

and humility which did not understand its own charm, and therefore could not take love and admiration as a matter of course.

Now, as she stood silently looking round at the stirring of life, deep down in her heart awoke a longing to be more worthy of love. Love had perhaps come to her, knocking at her door quietly, and she had disregarded the call ; let it pass unthinking, to mourn all her life that she had not seen and known in time. But that was no reason why she should live the rest of her life unworthy of the golden gift that had been offered. The tears hung thickly to the girl's heavy lashes as she stood alone, thinking, but they were not altogether hopeless tears, and presently she wiped them away, turned into the kitchen to fetch her hat, came out, locking the door after her, and went away quickly, through the village in the direction where the little grey church stood aside from the road.

An hour or so later she returned by the other road, going round by the two cottages, for with this awakening of sympathies had come the thought of Stephen's aunt, too long disregarded.

As Esther turned off the Rockhampton road, almost opposite the gate into the fields on the cliff, she saw a small form in the middle of the road wending its way towards the cottages. Trixie, the old sheep-dog, alone.

He did not run, as dogs do when out for a walk, from side to side, nor did he appear the least interested in his surroundings. His gait was stiff and weary ; his whole manner that of a thinking person in deep dejection, with drooping head, slack tail, unnoticing, he trotted homewards.

Esther called him softly, then louder. There was a slight hesitation, a twitch of one grey ear, then he increased his pace a little and continued his route.

"He's deafer than ever, dear old Trixie, boy," said Esther to herself.

The gate was set half open by a stone. Trixie pushed through and climbed the path; Esther followed, moving the stone and closing the gate. The garden was neat as labour could make it, the cottage silent, no smoke issuing from the chimney, the door was not closed, but set ajar also by one of the round white stones from the border.

The old dog pushed through and disappeared. A sudden foreboding clutched at Esther's throat; she put back the thought; where the dog was there his mistress must be; but forgetting to knock she pushed the door open in her eagerness and looked into the kitchen.

Mrs. Fearey was there. Sitting by the little round table before the empty grate, motionless. She was leaning her head on her folded arms, which rested on the table. The small work-worn hands lay open in an attitude of abandon. On the table close by was the felt hat, and a very small pile of cold potatoes on a plate.

The old dog had gone straight to her side, and sitting down as close as he could press, rested his head on her knee, and turned his eyes up to Esther with that look of patient waiting and humble devotion only seen in the eye of a dog.

The girl stood stricken. A pang of self-judgment pierced her heart. Her own selfish absorption in grief rose before her; long weeks of idle brooding and helpless repining. She, young and strong, with a father who loved her close by only waiting to try and comfort her; and here, alone, quite alone in the world, was the woman who had brought up Stephen, and in losing him lost her all. All she had to love; all her means of support, evidently. Mrs. Fearey had always kept her little affairs to herself; and less charitable neighbours had hinted that she was well off, but Esther had never thought that probable, for her

husband had not been one to save, and the little memorials of the past in her kitchen were all that was left of more prosperous days. The fireless grate, the cold potatoes untouched, and above all the pathetic figure before her, struck a blow at Esther's very soul, that in one moment broke down the barrier she had built round her inner self, and swept away the blindness that had prevented her from realizing the breaking of the heart so close to her.

She sprang forward with her old loving impetuosity, and kneeling down by the dog threw her strong arms round the frail, stooping figure.

"Aunt Fearey, *don't!* Oh please—remember there's me, always."

The pilot's widow raised her head. Then Esther saw that she was not asleep, or crying, her face had been resting on her Bible, and round that her arms were clasped.

Her small figure was shrunk, her face was pinched and deeply lined, but the light in her bright eyes was as brave as ever, and she smiled as she kissed the soft cheek that was pressed against hers.

"Why, dearie girl, did I frighten you?" she said, "and no wonder. But you might have known by Baby. If I'd a been crying he'd have carried on dreadful, so you couldn't have given him any comfort. But there, he knew well enough, that was why he was sitting so still, bless his heart."

"Have you had any dinner, auntie?" said Esther. And then, as a faint pink flush stole over the old woman's cheek, she said coaxingly, "Come home with me now, please, *please* come home. Dad's away for two days. You and Baby come. I can't do without you to-night, you *must*."

Mrs. Fearey hesitated, but Esther's eyes entreated and she went on bravely—

"I've been wicked and selfish. I've been mad, and dead in my heart. I've neglected dad and the home.

I've been blind and cruel, a disgrace and shame. Don't stop me, auntie ; you *couldn't* say anything bad enough for all I've been," her lips trembled, and the tears brimmed over and ran down her cheeks, but she smiled through them, shook her head and went on—

"Will you let me do something, auntie ? of course I can't be what Steve was, but will you show me how to be more like *him*, and you ? and will you teach me how you—you find it all in *this* ?" and she laid her hand on the open Bible. "I've been nothing all my life but a selfish thing." Mrs. Fearey tried to stop her, but she only received a hug, and the girl went on—"I haven't, it's true. A live thing, without any soul, I believe ; or anyhow not so much as Trixie. Only just living for sunshine and happy times, and working because I liked it. You don't know, you haven't an idea how selfish and unthinking I've been, and then—I saw you, and *him*, and I saw he lived for duty, and more than duty, auntie ?" she paused anxiously.

"More than duty, dearie, yes," said Mrs. Fearey, "he lived for the love of God, did Steve, and to be a true man."

"That's what I mean exactly, and you do too. Not for anything you can find here."

"If we lived for what we could find here it would be poor comfort in trouble," answered Mrs. Fearey, stroking Esther's hair. "Life's pretty hard for most ; the older you grow the plainer you'll see that things are fairly equal. Most people have something given them to cut the cords that tie them down ; and it's the truest kindness, you see, dearie, isn't it, when you consider this isn't our real home."

"All this will you show me because I love Stephen," said Esther.

"For your sake as well as for his sake," said the little woman, taking the girl's face between her hands and looking earnestly into the deep brown eyes.

"Will you show me how to be a real woman, a true woman, worthy of Stephen?" said Esther again. Mrs. Fearey kissed her, looking into the girl's eyes she thought the true womanhood had been born with the awakening of Esther's soul.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MILLER'S GRIP

UST a minute, dearie," said Mrs. Fearey as they left the house, and she tapped at the next door. Mary opened it, and the little woman went in, while Esther stood waiting on the step.

In the second cottage there was not the same appearance of desolation. The room was cosy, a small fire burned brightly, and the two old women looked much as usual. Mrs. Fearey told them she was going to stay with Esther, and promised to call at the usual time to help old Susan to bed.

"They look better, I think," said Esther, as she closed the gate carefully after holding it open for Trixie to pass.

"It's the weather brightening," said Mrs. Fearey.

"The weather has a wonderful effect on poor Susan, I've always noticed that. Poor thing, how she does bear her trouble! It's a lesson to us all, I'm sure."

Esther looked down at the little upright figure trotting at her side, with quick appreciation.

"Auntie," she said suddenly, "what do they do about the rent? The ten shillings, I mean, that used to come from Rockhampton?"

Mrs. Fearey started guiltily, and a flush spread over

her cheek ; she did not meet Esther's searching glance as she said with less than her usual decision—

"Oh, that's all right so far. They haven't missed it—that is, not yet—they can do."

"That means to say that they are getting it still," said Esther, pushing the question as she saw it was evaded.

Mrs. Fearey looked round fussily, and called the dog who was close at her heels.

"Auntie," went on Esther, almost inclined to laugh, though there were tears in her voice, "don't try and put me off. You know you send that ten shillings yourself, and you know you can't afford it."

"Why, bless you, dearie," exclaimed Mrs. Fearey in an aggrieved tone, "now I ask you, could they do without it? Two of them, let alone poor Susan's health, and me only one, and as strong as can be. Now don't you go and give Mary an idea."

Esther shook her head and bit her lips, while the pilot's widow free to speak chattered on.

"I always said it was my dear boy, didn't I, dearie?"

Esther nodded.

"Well, I waited, and the day passed ; the money never came as usual. I just watched to see, and there was Mary coming to the door when the postman passed, and she'd look after him, and then go in and shut the door. I used to go in and see them, and not a word did they say to complain. It meant a lot to them, you see, dearie girl, because rent *must* be paid, and there was nothing put by to meet it. So I just made an errand to Rockhampton and sent it myself ; I've got things by me I shall never miss, it was nothing to *me*."

Esther put out her hand and took the other's in it. Mrs. Fearey gave the girl's hand a little squeeze, and went on cheerfully as they walked hand-in-hand.

"It was worth ten pounds, let alone ten shillings, to see Mary's face when the postman came. 'What

is it, Mary?' I said, coming to my door. 'It's our rent,' she says, opening the letter and taking out the postal-order. I'd sent it just as usual, having seen it many's the time. 'Oh you're all right then,' I said; 'isn't it a bit late this time?' 'Well,' she says, 'it might have been a little late,' as if her heart hadn't been in her mouth for days and days. 'But there,' she said, 'it only shows my poor faith, getting anxious when the Lord is always waiting there to help. I'm ashamed,' she said, 'it'll be a lesson to me.' Dear! I *was* glad."

"Has anybody ever told you, you are an angel?" said Esther, as she held the gate open.

Mrs. Fearey laughed.

"*Angel*—I like that. No, dearie, not even Fearey. I'm not the kind to be compared to angels. Nothing but a plain woman; I can't remember that any one ever told me I was good-looking, for that matter."

"Well, I'll tell you, you are an angel, and a dear little fairy godmother like a story-book; and besides that, you are like a robin that stays by us all the dark weather when the other birds go; and you're like sweet herbs growing in the background, not pretending to be flowers, and yet just as sweet and useful besides—I could tell you heaps of things you remind me of."

"Well," said the little woman, smiling, "that's the finest speech I've ever had made to me. I never saw such a child! Now let me go and have a look at those bees of yours."

"Not a single thing shall you do till you've had dinner," exclaimed Esther despotically. "Don't imagine for one moment you've come here to do as you like. I've got you, and you are to do as *I* like."

Those three days passed happily for each one of the little party.

Mrs. Fearey told Esther all Stephen had said about his love, and how he had made up his mind that he

would not show it. And when Esther understood that he had not avoided her from annoyance, but because he dare not see her, little shafts of sunshine shot into her gloom, the darkest corners were lighted up, and her sore heart had rest in the consciousness that she owned the whole love of this good man.

"If only, auntie, if only he could have known that I loved him," she said, with her cheek on Mrs. Fearey's knee.

"You didn't know it yourself, dearie, not then. But never mind, he knows now, I expect. And, after all, this life is such a little bit of time at the longest; at least, so a person feels when they get to my years; such a little bit of time to look back at."

Esther said nothing, but she thought, as many a young soul has thought before, that a life-time is very long to look forward to, especially when you think you have missed all that could make it happy.

When Mrs. Fearey returned home something of her old manner had returned; and as for Trixie, his stay with Esther had made a firm impression on his mind, and from that day he made a point of visiting her in her daily walks with a constant patronage and lively sense of the warmth and comfort found at old Tewkesbury's cottage, on the day that his own home had been barren of all satisfaction.

Esther went to the gate, and even wandered down the road on the evening she expected her father. She could not tell the exact hour, but her knowledge of tides and wind made her a fairly accurate judge. She was restless to welcome him. The sense of her neglect during the last weeks distressed her now, even out of all proportion it loomed as a shame and disgrace; and she was eager to wipe it out. It is one of the most certain things in life, that when we arrange how a thing should happen, it should not occur as we expected. Sometimes, when we have been ready to humble ourselves to the utmost, the humility is not

required of us ; and sometimes, when in an enthusiasm of repentance, we picture other people delighted to recognize it and receive us with the same enthusiasm, we find we are unnoticed.

Esther had been down to the gate and back several times before her father came ; and he appeared at the door as she was making up the fire, the noise of the shovel preventing the sound of his step from reaching her.

She stood up quickly and made a step forward, her heart beating, and her sweet eyes shining. But Michael did not look at her.

His face was grey and tired ; two deep lines showed by his mouth, and his brows were drawn down ; he came slowly up to the fire, and leaning his elbow against the high shelf, passed his hand wearily over his eyes.

A cold sense of disappointment fell on Esther. She drew near, and passing her hand through his arm, laid her head against his sleeve in her old coaxing way. Carne pressed her hand against his side in answer as it were, but he did not move.

"Dad," said Esther presently, "is there anything the matter?"

No answer, but he turned his head away a little more.

"Dad, I wish you'd tell me."

A little tremble passed through the arm she held ; and Esther, looking up anxiously, presently saw a tear creep down from under the strong knotted fingers that covered his eyes.

"Oh, dad, don't. What is it? Please tell me ; nothing will be so bad if you'll tell me."

Michael moved slightly and looked round at her. His eyes were dull, and stained with the slow tears of a man who feels strongly.

"I've been a fool, my girl," he said brokenly. "Counting on mercy when there is none. I've ruined us both."

"The house?"

"It'll have to go. We've lost everything. The fool I've been not to see!" and Carne clenched his hard hands.

"Won't they wait, dad?" Esther asked the question as he paused, but she knew what the answer must be from his face.

"Wait! No. It's been a trap all along, Esther, to get the house from us, and I was so blind I never thought."

"A trap!" The girl echoed the words with a deadly coldness settling on her heart.

"I can see it all now it's too late," went on Carne restlessly. "See the reason of the terms as plain as possible. Don't you remember? We were not to have less than fifty pounds—a big sum to pay back at once. We were not to have it for more than a year. We were to take it or leave it, then, no time to consider; and no time to find out who the lender might be."

Esther nodded as she met his eyes, and the cold fear clutched closer at her brain.

"I can't think why I never guessed!—but there, when you've made up your mind you want a thing, you're only too ready to believe it's all plain sailing. The same lawyers too. '*Our client*'"—he dwelt on the words with extreme bitterness. "I might have known it would pay them to serve his purpose; blind fool I've been!"

"Father," said Esther, and her lips were dry, "do you mean that the miller is the man who—who holds the mortgage?"

"That's exactly what I do mean," answered Carne grimly.

Both were silent, thinking their own thoughts. Presently Esther said, and her voice was very quiet, "Now I see what he meant that day, the last time he was here—we should be sorry 'when the shoe pinched.'"

I thought he meant when we were very poor, perhaps ; he must have been thinking of *this*."

"Thinking," repeated Carne savagely ; "I should say he was thinking."

"Who told you this?" asked the girl ; her mind was feeling as it were to realize the limits of the calamity, and its possibilities in the future.

"He told me—the lawyer," answered Carne drearily. "There isn't any mistake. I went there to ask if the mortgage could be renewed. To tell the truth I hadn't worried overmuch, because I knew we could meet the interest now I'm well again. I told him things had been against me, and the money had been used for necessities. He said 'Quite likely,' and smiled. Then I said, I'd be pleased to pay even higher interest for extended time, and he said it was impossible ; that his instructions were to foreclose when the time expired, unless the £50 were paid down in full. I tried him every way. Then he said, 'I may as well tell you, Mr. Carne, that the holder of the mortgage is Mr. Emmett, the miller of Durlmouth, and that he instructed us to lend you this money in order that the cottage might not fall into other hands, as he has long intended to purchase it, if possible.' Might not fall into other hands ! Might not fall into any hands but his own ! *That* was in his heart from the first. Envy of this corner-bit that bites a scrap out of his big fields. Robber ! As if he hadn't enough already, but he must fasten on our little home, and sweep it in with the rest." And Carne ended with a heavy sob, and a string of passionate invectives muttered between his teeth.

"I wonder that he didn't tell us himself before," said Esther, not because she really wondered, but because she had to say something, and her mind was sterile of ideas.

"He took care we shouldn't know his name at first," said her father. "Afterwards it didn't really

matter, I suppose. He was quiet enough about it as long as all was friendly. I remember how he looked when I told him about it first; not a bit of expression."

"He never had any expression," remarked Esther softly, with a little flash of her old fun, but Michael was too angry to notice.

"He drew me out as to what we'd spent, and what was left, and so on. I remember one day when I was down about the paying he said it couldn't be of any consequence; of course it could easily be renewed. Liar!"

"Dad," said Esther, and her voice trembled. "Don't you see it's really all my fault? I know why he didn't show before; because he thought—you know—I should marry him, and I expect he thought he'd give it to us in a grand way, as a surprise. It is I that have brought this on you really, of course. We should never have heard any more about the mortgage if I had done as he wished. It seems—it seems as though——" She broke down and clung to her father's arm, crying bitterly; and the bitterest cause of her weeping lay in the fact that at the very moment she had intended to bring her father happiness, and wipe out the memory of her selfish sorrow, the blow had fallen that made her the innocent cause of his ruin.

Michael did not understand entirely how she felt, but he realized that she fancied the fault was hers, and soothed her with tender words and reassurances.

"Don't you fret, my girl. I've said too much and made you ill again. There, what does it matter? Let the house go, we've got the boat. We had no house before; we'll live on the boat, if that's all, and not be in any man's grip." Then in answer to a stifled murmur from Esther about having brought it on him, he went on persuasively—

"Put that out of your head once for all. I wouldn't

let you marry the fellow now for twenty times his income. My daughter shouldn't go to a man of his stamp. I thought he was a good sort. There, Esther, girl, cheer up; don't you think I regret it; let's be thankful we found out he was that sort in time. It might have been worse; you might have married him."

Esther knew that much of this was said to soothe her, but she looked back smiles and love into the dark eyes bent on her so anxiously; and in a little while they both recovered somewhat, and were able to talk more quietly.

There was not the slightest hope of saving the house. They could live. They could pay the interest and even save five shillings a week perhaps, if the work continued, but they could not save fifty pounds before the end of July.

Nothing would be gained by selling the boat; because it would deprive them of their means of livelihood. It occurred to Esther that this might be done if her father would reconcile himself to working as a "hand," instead of owner; she suggested it with some diffidence, but Carne shook his head.

Brown Bird was not worth fifty pounds. She was old. Well kept, it was true; but tinkered up, old-fashioned, without the most modern conveniences. And the brown sails from which she took her name were patched and thin. It was almost a relief to them both to realize that this alternative was impossible.

"She's not a bit of good," said Carne eagerly; "not a bit. Nobody would give twenty pounds for her, not if they knew anything about a boat." And Esther as warmly agreed.

Later on the girl told her father about Mrs. Fearey, and what she had seen at two cottages. She told him about the ten shillings, of how it had been Steve's little charity, among many others, and how the two old widows knew nothing of the giver. Carne listened with his eyes on the fire, and at the end of the recital

took his pipe from his lips and pushed the tobacco down into the bowl with a finger that shook a little. Then he raised his sad eyes and looked at Esther across the small table.

"A little while ago I was ready to say that the world was full of cruel-hearted people who enjoyed the misery of others," he said thoughtfully. "I thought of the lawyer, not minding who was ruined—all in the way of business. I dare say he's a good enough fellow in his own family. I thought of Emmett planning to get our little home; and the people here who would glory to see us turned out. As I came back to-day, all the way I was staring at the sea and thinking the world's a cruel hard place; no pity for them who go under. And now you tell me all this; the poor saving the poor from starvation, loving-hearted and merciful——"

"Dad," said Esther suddenly, stretching her hands impulsively towards him across the little table. "Dad, don't mind my saying, will you, I know now, because Mrs. Fearey has showed me. It isn't a chance of people's natures, just whether they happen to be kind or not—like *we* thought. It's God—it's love. The same thing really. They love other people because they love God. Don't you see? I can't put it like she can. She knows it all, she knows the Bible by heart. It's love for everybody makes them so good; and belief and faith in *God's* love makes them trust, however bad things are. Mrs. Fearey isn't afraid of anything—d' you see? And old Mary and Susan don't fear they'll be forgotten. They trust Him to *remember* them, exactly as I *know* you'd remember me. Dad, I do so want to be the same. I'm trying to get like Mrs. Fearey in trusting. I do believe; it's plain and straight for any one to understand. You guide your life by it, and then the trust comes and grows and grows till you don't mind what happens; things can't *shake* you."

She looked at him wistfully, and Carne, looking back, saw a new light and depth in her lovely eyes.

"If you'll go with me, dad, in trying, I shan't have a thing to wish for."

Carne grasped the two slim hands stretched across the table in his own, and looked down at them thoughtfully.

"We'd need have something, my girl," he said, after a pause of consideration. "We'd need have something when the world seems to be slipping away, and you find you're losing all you thought you'd got. The old boat's rotten; I'm getting on in years, and couldn't work her long if she was likely to last for ever. The little home I thought would be ours is going to be sold over our heads. We'd need have something to hold to; and some one to care. He paused again, and then said with a smile that lighted his eyes to a likeness of the sweet ones fixed on his—" "Yes, my girl. You shall tell me what you like, I'll only be too thankful to hear, and go with you in trying. I'm a poor wretched failure, that's about it. I'd need trust in God, for I can't trust myself. I've made nothing of life—without Him."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MILLER HAS NO CONSCIENCE



R. EMMETT sat at breakfast on a glorious morning in the beginning of June, with a sense of comfort and well-being pervading his mind and body. It cannot be said that Mr. Emmett had a conscience; indeed he did not recognize the existence of such a capacity, for he would have called any inconvenient misgiving

"sentiment," and he did not know what it was to feel shame. Transactions that had their merit in over-reaching other people were, in the miller's eyes, business, and distinctly laudable; while want of heart, incapacity for sympathy, absence of tenderness and so on, were, to his ideas, enviable states of mind to be cultivated and admired, as likely to tend more than anything else to the increase of banking accounts and the growth of solid worldly possessions.

His system had answered excellently, as proved by his pass-book, and he was entirely contented both with it and himself.

It has been said before that nothing, however trivial, that happened in Durlmouth escaped the miller's notice; therefore the change in Esther had excited in him first interest, in wondering what she expected to gain by it; and secondly, contempt, when he perceived that she was actually losing, from his standpoint.

He knew the debt could not be paid, for he himself regulated Carne's voyages and paid for them, and yet both father and daughter appeared to wear an air of serenity that puzzled Mr. Emmett.

Esther worked in the garden all the springtime, and it was now an example of care and cultivation. She went in the ketch and sold her honey at Salterne or Rockhampton, even that the miller knew, also how much a pound she got for it. All this he could understand, but there were other things Esther did that appeared to the miller as folly of the weakest kind.

Esther helped Stephen's aunt in many ways; worked in her garden, collected wood for her fire, shared food with her by all sorts of pretexts; sometimes pretending she wanted her cooking tasted; often taking presents from Salterne or Rockhampton.

Carne insisted that he and his daughter were under numberless obligations to Mrs. Fearey for all the weeks of nursing and many friendly offices. He was

deeply hurt at any attempt at refusal, so Mrs. Fearey accepted as she would have given, taking it all as blessings, without false pride or repinings.

Then Esther might be seen pulling old Susan's chair along the roads for shelter, on to the cliff waste for air. Mrs. Saunders, journeying from Rockhampton on a market-day, had come upon them resting by the side of the road; old Susan asleep in the sunshine; Esther making primroses up into bunches as she sat on the bank, and had stopped to stare, hurrying home afterwards to tell her husband, who duly reported it all to his master.

The miller himself met her carrying Lily Kentfield and talking to "young Reube," who ran by her side waving a peeled stick.

Mrs. Saunders was very scornful about the way "that Carne girl had got over" Mrs. Kentfield, but Esther had used no guile. She went to the Kentfields' house one day, not long after her talk with her father, and asked if she might have Lily to tea.

Mrs. Kentfield was not an ill-natured woman, and the indefinable alteration in Esther touched her. She remembered that this girl had lost her lover, and refused to marry the rich miller for love of his memory. She recognized now, in the light of experience, that the Carnes had not ruined her, nor taken the bread out of her children's mouths, as Mrs. Saunders had prophesied. She knew that Carne worked as hard as any other man, and earned no better money. Esther had not "lauded over" the village in the days of the miller's patronage, she had certainly ignored them, but then Mrs. Kentfield knew well enough she had been treated in unneighbourly fashion, and deep down in the woman's heart was knowledge of, and shame for, a certain cruel destruction of brown sails, the actual perpetrators of which had never been exposed.

Therefore when the open door revealed Esther

standing thinner, paler, with a sort of serene patience shining from her soft deep eyes, Mrs. Kentfield wiped her elbows on her apron and came forward with a nervous fluster of manner. Esther smiled.

"I came to ask a favour, Mrs. Kentfield. Has Lily forgotten me?—would you let me have her and Reuben to tea?"

Mrs. Kentfield found herself saying, "Thank you very much," and offering a chair, which Esther took, and in a few minutes they were talking of the children and the gardens, and more wonderful still of the boats and voyages. There was a new Kentfield baby which Lily pointed out with fingers in mouth, and Esther admired it with a genuine delight and amaze at its beauty that went to its mother's heart.

"Oh, yes, you can have Lily, and thank you kindly," Mrs. Kentfield found herself saying at the door in a tone of friendliness that drew Mrs. Saunders' reproachful eye to the window of the next door house. But Mrs. Kentfield was not to be browbeaten, even by Mrs. Saunders, and talked in pleasant tones mainly directed at the watching eye, till Esther departed with Lily in a clean pinafore.

"Well, I *am* surprised," said Mrs. Saunders from the half-open door; "some people can turn round so that you don't know where to have them."

"And some people are so jealous they'd spite the very gooseberries on the bushes," retorted Mrs. Kentfield, with reckless simile, suggested by her own front garden; and then she went in and shut her door and sang to the baby with a pleasing sense of triumph.

This was how Esther came to be carrying Lily Kentfield when the miller saw her; she looked at him with serene, soft eyes, and Mr. Emmett was faintly conscious of a stir in his heart, more than admiration, perhaps reverence, for this beautiful, gentle woman with the child's arms clasped tightly round her neck.

In these ways and others, too many to detail,

Esther had lived through the spring months, and proved that the love sown in her heart was the real Spirit of Love, and no fleeting impulse. All of it had Mr. Emmett observed, and without understanding the root of the growth, he approved of the result, and desired more than ever to marry her.

On this particular morning he had been reading letters from his solicitor, and it recalled to his mind how close the time was drawing for the final transaction over the Carnes' business.

"I shall pull down the cottage at once," thought Mr. Emmett, "and dig the whole thing in, it spoils the look of the Big Field, to my mind," and with a comfortable sense of doing what he had long wished, he began opening his newspapers.

The miller took in several, and some of them were large and difficult to fold tightly. He tore the cover off one and opened it out; as he did so a foreign envelope of the usual long thin form dropped at his feet. It had slipped into the folds of the paper, unnoticed by the postman. Mr. Emmett stooped to pick it up without a thought beyond a little surprise at the discovery, and looked at the address—

MRS. EMMA FEAREY,
The Two Cottages,
Durlmouth Cove,
DORSETSHIRE, ENGLAND.

and the Canadian stamp with a postmark, Vancouver, May 16.

The miller stared at the envelope, at the stamp, at the postmark. The handwriting was large and good, careful and not very flowing; there was a seal of red wax, pressed by an English sixpence apparently.

For full five minutes the miller sat, then he put the letter in his breast-pocket, and rising from his arm-chair went to the window and stared out at the quay.

Presently he went out, gave his orders, looked round

after his usual habit and returned, sat down again and took up his newspaper, but he did not read it, his eyes ran along the lines unseeing, returning again and again to the same place. After a full quarter of an hour he threw down the paper and took out the letter again and looked at it, then suddenly as by an overpowering impulse opened it and unfolded the sheets.

He looked at the beginning, "MY DEAR AUNT." He looked at the signature, "Your ever loving nephew, STEVE."

Then he began again at the beginning and read the letter all through. The writing swam before his eyes; full his head felt, full and throbbing, it was difficult to take it all in.

"Saved. Picked up in the Channel by a big four-masted barque running from London to Vancouver with a mixed cargo. Went over with the mizzen when he was hacking at it, but held on, and was washed out by the strong ebb tide. Had on his cork belt, and managed to lash himself with some of the rope to the mast. After that could not remember much but the terrible cold. Was sighted next morning and picked up unconscious for dead. Didn't remember anything for many days, and only awoke to rheumatic fever and weeks of suffering."

The miller looked up when he got thus far and stared at the opposite wall. After considering awhile he went on, and his face was harder than before.

"Terrible time round the Horn, shifting cargo, and he couldn't move hand or foot; the other chaps as good to him as possible, but a pretty rough time for all. Writing this anchored just inside Cape Flattery off a real little American log city, only about thirty log huts, but everything called a 'city' out there; waiting for a towboat to pull the ship into Victoria. She was to be there about four weeks, the same in

Vancouver, and probably Tacoma too. But he was pretty well by this time, and was going to try and work his passage back on a steam-line to get home quicker. Was going to do his best to ship on the return journey at once, as he was afraid it would be impossible to come across America because of the expense."

The miller read on through all the anxious inquiries and fears for his old aunt's health. Stephen's grief at not being able to assure her earlier of his safety, and thankfulness that the post after all was only a fortnight and five days from Vancouver, so that she could not be left in sorrow much longer. Then came careful instructions about the little sum still laid by in the local bank at Salterne, and an order on the bank written on half a sheet of paper, carefully signed, and made out to Emma Fearey, for the £10 still banked; with a request to his aunt to go to the bank with the letter and order and present it herself when she would receive the money, and be able to tide over the time till he could return.

The letter ended with a postscript.

"I suppose Esther will be married by the time I come home? Bad as all this has been, perhaps it was all for the best, as it keeps one out of the way, and gives you something to think about."

The miller read this two or three times over, then a heavy flush crept over his face and forehead. "Curse the fellow," he said slowly, "why couldn't he drown like the others."

Then he deliberately twisted the thin sheets up into a long paper-light, and striking a match on his boot sole set fire to it, and held it till it burned to the end, then he threw it down and ground his heel on it. He did the same to the envelope, and lastly to the cheque. Having consumed the three, he gave a short laugh, and put his hands in his pockets, and strolled out of the room. The soft summer air blew into the window

swayed the clean muslin curtains and the white blind tassels, caught up the tiny grey shreds of charred paper and fluttered them away in the draught of the door, which presently banged, leaving the last wee particles of Stephen's loving letter to settle in the corners, lost for ever.

It has been said that Mr. Emmett had no conscience. The act that he had just perpetrated did not disturb him in the least, nor did he give the nature of it a second thought. "Funny chance that, about the letter coming to me," he thought, as he stood in the mill-house watching the machinery and the busy workers. "If they'd got it just now it would have been the finishing touch. If the girl knew he was alive there wouldn't be a chance. Whereas now—you can't tell—it isn't pleasant to be turned out of house and home. She'll change her mind when it comes to the last." To the little patient woman grieving in poverty he gave not one thought.

So the weeks crept on towards the end of the year's grace. The end of July would see the anniversary of the day when Michael Carne raised the fifty pounds. He and Esther had ceased to struggle or repine. The helplessness of their position had made them trust perforce ; sometimes people will not surrender themselves as long as they have any belief in their own powers ; it requires the sense of weakness and hopeless inability to avert calamity to force them to lean only on God, and place all in His hands. Michael kept his eyes from wandering to the little possession which had given him such proud satisfaction when he first came to Durlmouth. Prettier than ever in its summer dress, "old Tewkesbury's cottage" was like a picture, the clean paint, new thatch, and well-kept garden making it as desirable a little home outside as Esther's care and clever fingers did inside.

Mrs. Fearey knew about the trouble. Esther was surprised that she showed so little astonishment.

"I guessed, my dearie!" said the little woman sadly.

"Why—what should have made you think that?"

"It was something our Steve said one day he come home. You and your father were away, and Steve saw the miller in the garden looking over the place. It came over me all in a minute then, like the story of the King and the pretty vineyard in the Bible."

"Did Steve know, did you tell him?" asked Esther.

"I told him what I fancied; but Steve could hardly think any man could do such a thing; it was difficult for him to suspect always, you know, dearie."

"I know," said Esther, and her eyes were very soft.

"But it worked on his mind all the same," went on the little woman. "It was that chiefly made him keep away; knowing he couldn't pay the thing himself, he couldn't bear to ask you to lose a home for him; you see, that was how it was."

And Esther did see.

In the beginning of July, Michael Carne wrote to the miller, offering to pay a good rent for the cottage if he might be allowed to remain till he could save enough to pay the debt. The miller replied in business terms that he could not accept the offer, as he had long decided to pull down the cottage.

Esther turned very white as she finished the letter. There was a postscript.

"If Esther chooses to change her mind, I will give her the cottage as a wedding present."

She raised her eyes to her father's with pathetic pleading in their gentle depths.

Michael answered the question in them with quiet resolution.

"No, dear, no. Don't give it a thought. If the Almighty means us to go He'll take care of us somewhere else. We're not going to trust *half*, you and me, eh, Esther?"

In the evening Mrs. Fearey came in, with Baby at her heels, to speak to Michael.

"The child has told me about the letter, Mr. Carne," she said, setting her hat straight with a little agitation. "It's a troubling letter."

"It is that, ma'am," said Michael smiling.

"I see you haven't lost faith that it's somehow for the best, Mr. Carne?" and the little woman looked as happy as though they had been discussing the brightest news.

"Well, I suppose faith is meant for foul weather as well as fair," said Michael, "else it wouldn't be a very real sort of thing. No, Esther and I mean to take what comes."

"Because it's sent. There you are, now that's good hearing, and if you'll believe me, Mr. Carne, who has tried it these many years now, that I never had so much happiness before, in spite of all the trials sent. But what I wanted to say particularly was, that supposing things *do* go cross, supposing they really do—all they say; you and Esther will come up to the two cottages, and live with me, at least, for a bit. It's no obligation," she went on quickly, as Michael exclaimed. "There isn't another house in the village, that was all I was thinking, and you don't want to leave your employment. It will be share and share, *plenty* of room for three; why, look at the treat it would be to me and Baby to have Esther when you were away. You may look at it that you'd be doing a charity really, Mr. Carne, because I'm a poor woman. It's pleased the Almighty to make it hard living at times for me, and it would be a benefit to share the house."

"Mrs. Fearey," said Michael, "you're a good friend. I'll take it just as you mean it, and say it would be the best thing for us, too, for a while, anyway. I may tell you that it has worried me a bit about where to live; I'd thought it must be the boat, but that

wouldn't be comfortable for Esther. There's not a place in the village, and it would have been a bit hard on us to have to lose the work. Thank you, ma'am, you're very good."

So it was settled, and the plan became a subject of discussion between the friends. The furniture was the most difficult question, and this was not so difficult as at first appeared, for the simple reason that Mrs. Fearey had so wonderfully little, when you came to look at it, that a little more would be welcome, and Mary and Susan offered to house the rest till such time as it should be wanted.

"They've got an empty room up-stairs, you see," said Mrs. Fearey triumphantly. "It's wonderful how things seem to fit in, isn't it, as convenient as can be? really it seems as the two cottages were made to hold us all; and think of the company we shall be, so happy all together."

Esther kissed the little woman with a smile, and a shine on her long lashes. The eager, loving welcome, the gay "plans," all for *their* benefit, seemed to warm away the little chill that sometimes would creep into her heart in spite of her brave struggle.

CHAPTER XIX

ESTHER AND TRIXIE PULL UP A GOOSEBERRY BUSH



SOME days after this arrangement was concluded Esther was alone in the cottage. Tea was over, and Michael gone down to the quay to set *The Bird* in perfect order after a thunderstorm that had necessitated the drying of all the sails.

A restless spirit had taken possession of the girl. She had wandered over the little house setting chairs

straight, and re-tying curtains; and as she looked round at the little sitting-room her heart sank with a sudden shock of pain. Dear little, pretty little house! to be soon a pile of dust and rubbish. The windows were set open, and the roses tapped against the pane outside. The big lavender bushes were in bud, and the little path banked either side by sweet-scented flowers. Esther leaned against the doorway and looked out.

Only a fortnight more would it be theirs, their very own. She remembered the pride and joy with which they received news of the will. A house of their own; no rent to pay! Little more than a year ago, and now it was going. The dream would pass like her dream of love, and life would always go on, dull and monotonous, and she would grow old and still go on working, perhaps in some ugly place. She struggled against the depression that overwhelmed her, turning her eyes away from the pretty garden to the quiet cliffs and the lovely summer sky.

"Thunderclouds broken up and sailing away and away," thought Esther, as the golden light fell aslant the valley and streamed across the garden, showing up the thousands of diamond drops on the bushes and flowers. "Thunderstorms in *our* lives are dark and terrible, but they break when God wills, and the light will come if we are patient."

Her thoughts were interrupted by the shaking of the garden gate, which was pushed from the outside. The latch had not caught, and a grey nose was presently visible, followed by the staid form of Trixie, who ambled up the path without looking to right or left.

"Come along, Trixie, boy," said Esther. "That's right, I was just getting discontented, and you've come to tell me what a lot we've got to be thankful for."

The old dog answered the voice by agitation of his

tail, and trotting up to the door, paused by the girl, and licked the hand she put down to pat his head.

Esther sat down on the doorstep, and with her cheek against the grey head of the dog, and talked to him in a low voice which he seemed to understand, for the faithful eye shone with sympathy, and now and again a stiff paw was raised to scrape her arm.

"And now, Baby," said the girl presently, "having got rid of all my bad thoughts, let us go and do something. It is dreadfully bad to do nothing when you feel sad. The house is lonely, so let's go into the garden and find something to do."

Trixie acquiesced with a stiff jump and a husky bark, and the two wandered out and round the cottage.

"What a lot of good the rain has done, Trixie," said Esther. "Yesterday the earth was hard; everything looks so pleased."

They paused before a line of gooseberry and currant bushes, Esther slowly picking up and eating some of the fruit that had been knocked off.

"Some of these are too close together, Baby, dear," she said thoughtfully, "and too old. Look, that one had no gooseberries on this year, I don't think it had any last year either; it is really dead wood. I've been waiting to see if it was any use. I shall just fetch the fork and dig it up, and then the others will have more room; besides, I can get at them more easily."

Trixie sat down on the cinder path by the side of the bush and watched the proceedings with interest. The gooseberry tree was old, and the roots were deep. Esther pushed in the fork and prized it up, after several strong efforts. Then she took hold of the stem with her hands and pulled, shaking the loosening earth from the roots.

Trixie got up and came round, looking eagerly into the hole, as though he expected the performance was a game for his especial benefit.

Up came the last root with a jerk, and Esther stood flushed and laughing with the big old bush in her two hands. Trixie was smelling in the hole, his ears pricked forward and his tail wagging.

"What is it, boy, what is it?" said Esther laughing. "Find it, Trixie."

And Trixie really appeared to expect to "find it," for he scraped busily with both fore-paws in the hole, with little anxious whines, and ears pricked forward.

Esther was amused, then interested. She tried to induce the dog to leave the hole, but he only scratched the faster, pushing his grey nose into the damp earth again and again, to withdraw it sneezing and shaking off the mould.

Seeing that he evidently intended to persist, Esther stuck the fork down into the place where Trixie seemed so eager to investigate, and putting her foot on it, drove it in as deeply as she could. The prongs met with resistance—not the resistance of hard earth, nor the jar of contact with a stone, but the resistance of something tough, and yet elastic.

* After a minute or two of vigorous pushing Esther desisted hot and panting. While the old dog, who had paused to watch her, threw himself upon the place with renewed excitement, scraping away the mould with pattering paws.

Something appeared; Esther stooped and touched it. A bit of tough oilskin, such as seamen's coats are made of—very dull, cracked, and shabby, but still tough and strong.

"Dear me, Baby," said the girl, pushing her hair off her forehead, "what a fuss about a bit of rubbish."

But Trixie evidently thought the rubbish interesting, for he sniffed it eagerly, tried to pull at it, and finding the want of teeth a serious difficulty, began scratching again, with little snorts of excitement.

"Really, Trixie," said Esther laughing, "I shall begin to think you are in your second childhood! Now



Trixie . . . sniffed it eagerly.

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you'll make yourself quite ill directly, and then what should I say to mother? Here, get out of the way this moment, you fierce beast, and let me get it out, whatever it is."

Trixie stood aside, or rather sat aside; for his exertions had been so great that he sat down on one hip, as it were, with his mouth open, and smiled at Esther gaspingly.

For quite five minutes the girl dug, and pulled, lifted, and shovelled aside earth; at the end of that time she dropped her fork, and dragged clear of the hole a big bundle that had been buried deeply and securely behind the line of old gooseberry bushes, not actually underneath them.

It appeared to be a seaman's oilskin coat; very old and worn, and considerably marred in appearance by its sojourn underground. Esther was surprised at the weight of it, but she put that down to the wet.

"Well, Baby, dear," she said, holding the bundle a little way from her clean dress, and making a face of distaste at the eager dog, "and now we've got it what shall we do with it? Perhaps it's good enough for dear dad to wear if we clean it, though it can't be worth much or old Uncle Tewkesbury would not have buried it. I can't take it into my nice clean kitchen with all the cracks full of wet earth, and, perhaps—worms! Trixie, we must shake it out here," and she began to pull at the rotten string which was wound once or twice round the bundle.

This came away easily enough, and the stiff oilskin began to open out, as it were, in her hands, Esther unpeeled it, for it was all sticking together, and it began to assume the semblance of a coat.

She shook it once or twice, holding it the length of her arms from her dress; a bit of the front and a button tore away in her hands, it seemed so heavy and yet it was unlined. Suddenly Esther's eye was

caught by something bright and glistening at her feet.

The thought flashed through her mind, "What a bright button!" and she stooped to pick it up. In her fingers lay *a sovereign*.

She turned it over and over; surprised and delighted, but, unreasoning, letting the coat drop at her feet. Her face was flushed with pleasure at the find, but where could it have come from?

Still holding the precious bit of gold she stooped to pick up the coat again, and in so doing grasped it by the sleeve.

Under her fingers was something hard and heavy, the sleeve was not empty. She lifted the coat carefully, her breath catching in her throat, and felt down the sleeve. It appeared to be a sort of bag, for it was firmly sewn up at the cuffs, and again at the arm-hole; and in it was something hard, heavy, and movable. Esther put her hand up to her throat, for her breath seemed to choke her, and stood motionless for a minute, staring round at the garden, the cottage, the quiet sky.

What was coming! She hardly dare think. Then rolling up the coat in her arms she ran towards the house, closely followed by Trixie, who appeared to regard the garment as his own especial interest; shut the door after her, threw the coat on the table, and stood gazing at it. The heavy thump as it fell brought her heart into her mouth (metaphorically speaking); it was such evidence of the presence of a real something.

With recovered calmness she found her scissors and cut some of the threads at the arm-hole, then she put in her hand and felt *coins*. She drew them out to the light and looked. Sovereigns, half-sovereigns, and a florin! Esther put them back into the sleeve and stood motionless, trembling, white as the fluttering curtains at the window.

Then she went outside, shut the door behind her, and stood leaning against the side of the porch waiting; her face quivering, and tears shining on her lashes, while she looked into the serene blue above, from which she seemed to fancy eyes of divine compassion were watching to see the joy and feel it with her.

Presently Michael came, shutting the gate, and looking along the little path at Esther standing by the door, with a smile in the sad eyes that had lately become so patient and steadfast. He was a little tired and his weaker foot dragged slightly.

As he came up to the door Esther suddenly sprang towards him and seized him by the arms.

"Dad, dad," she cried in a choked voice, "something has happened—wonderful, I *think*—but I daren't look till you came."

The colour left Carne's face, and his eyes sought hers with desperate inquiry.

Esther opened the door and stepped back into the kitchen, pulling him with her. Then she locked it behind them.

Michael stood and looked round, his eye full on the heap on the table, and for one second a wild idea leapt to his brain that somehow the battered heap of oilskin was connected with Stephen Weld, but before he could speak Esther began her explanation.

Hurried, disjointed; it had to be repeated once or twice before he grasped the sense.

"Buried behind the row of gooseberry trees. And you came on it through pulling up the old one in the end nearest the hedge, because it didn't bear and was squeezing the others; and found it was heavy, and a sovereign dropped out, and there's more in the sleeve." He echoed it all after her, realizing slowly that it meant—what?

"Empty the sleeve, dad," whispered Esther, almost too excited to speak out loud.

Carne took the coat gingerly.

"How shall I do it?" he said.

Then for the first time Esther laughed.

"Darling dad, we're both quite silly! Just tear the threads at the cuff; see, they are weak, the money is squeezing through. The one that fell out in the garden came out that way when I shook it. You hold the coat, and I'll hold my apron—they'd roll off the table."

Carne did as she suggested. A stream of coins poured into Esther's apron, and with them fell out a dirty envelope. Michael picked it up, and read the address on the outside, written in a cramped illiterate hand.

*"Mister Michael Carne or his daughter,
my great niece."*

"It's for us," said Michael, looking at Esther, and holding the envelope with a hand that shook.

"Open it," said the girl, with smiling eyes, "there will be a letter, perhaps."

Her father tore the envelope, and drew out a sheet of very cheap note-paper, folded several times. This he spread out and read.

"DEAR NEPHEW AND GREAT NIECE,

"If you take proper care of my garden you will find what I put away. If you can't look after a garden you don't deserve to find it. I had it put in my last Will and Testament that if you look after my garden it will be to your advantage. This is what I mean by the words. There ought to be £137 15s. I wish I could live long enough to make up £150; but it's taken me near on thirty years to scrape this together, besides a living. Don't waste it or let your daughter.

"Your affec. uncle,

"MICHAEL TEWKESBURY."

Father and daughter looked at each other.

"Dad," said Esther, "God didn't forget us."

Michael's face quivered as his hands fingered the sheet of paper.

"I don't deserve it," he said in a low voice, "I was an unbelieving man."

"Not unbelieving now," said the girl lovingly.

"God forbid," answered Michael quickly.

There was a silence while you might hear the clock ticking, and the two stood motionless looking at the heap of shining coin in Esther's apron, of which she held up the two corners. The pause was broken by a long whining yawn from Trixie, who had been sitting near with pricked ears and eager eye, waiting the issue of these strange doings. Esther began to laugh.

"It was Trixie really found it," said Esther, and she told the discovery in detail, while Michael listened to every word, and Baby fell asleep, for the circumstances were becoming wearisome to his mind.

The close of the recital was interrupted by a tap at the door.

"Come in," said Esther, rising.

The latch was tried, and then Mrs. Fearey's voice called out—

"The door's locked. I've come after my baby, is he here?"

Before Esther could reply, Trixie beset the door with cries and barks, scratchings and squealings.

"All right, all right, dearie boy," cried Mrs. Fearey's voice above the tumult. "Here's mother, don't you take on so, or you'll upset yourself for days."

Esther unlocked the door, and the old sheep-dog seized upon Mrs. Fearey's apron, dragging it to and fro, and jumping stiffly, while she adjured him to mind his manners and not behave "silly-like."

When peace was restored, Esther seized on her in turn, and the whole story had to be told again. The

coat was thrust into Mrs. Fearey's arms, she was led to the table, and Baby's part in the discovery was dwelt upon with proud insistence by the girl.

"It was the coat," said Mrs. Fearey solemnly. "The old man wore that coat year in year out when he got well on in years. He used to come up to my place in it; and Baby knew it, as well as could be. I used to come down here to look him up time and again when he was stiff with rheumatics, and he'd be sitting by a scrap of fire in that very coat. 'Why don't you have a good warm dressing-gown, Mr. Tewkesbury?' I'd say. 'It'd be more easy for you.' 'No thank you, Emma Fearey,' he'd say, 'dressing-gowns cost money, this coat will serve my time,' he'd say. Baby used to go up and sniff round him, and he'd pat the dog, but he'd never give him so much as a bit of sugar. I remember thinking the day he was found dead wherever the old coat had got to. He must have buried it in that last illness of his. Got out of his very bed to go and do it, I shouldn't be surprised, and quite near his death too, poor man. I remember he got another chill, and went off quite sudden at the last."

Michael and Esther listened eagerly to all she could tell them. The curious habits and lonely ways of the old uncle being now vested with a new and wonderful interest. Mrs. Fearey regarded the little piles of money with pleasure and almost awe, but there was no trace of covetousness in her expression.

"And now," she said, with almost a twinkle of mischief, "I suppose you don't know what to do with it all?"

Michael put his hands in his pockets and smiled; a serene smile of possession, as he glanced round the little room.

"I'm off to Rockhampton to-morrow," he said.

"Oh, dad, can I come too?" cried Esther.

"No, of course not," said Michael, moved to pleasantries in the sunshine of the wonderful relief.

"Not after I've dug up all your money for you?" said Esther, and they both laughed.

So next morning it came to pass that they were up with the sun, and caught the early train at the little wayside station a mile and a half distant, arriving in Rockhampton too early to visit Messrs. Norman and Platt.

They took the coat, the letter, and the money in a strong bag Esther had made, which was in turn bestowed in a leather handbag which had belonged to Michael's wife and descended to Esther.

Mr. Norman received the tale of the buried legacy with exactly the same pleasant indifference that he received all communications. He said, "I must congratulate you a second time, Mr. Carne, this is really most opportune," and Michael was far too placidly happy to reproach him for the former transactions, even had he dared to tackle such a mighty man.

The mortgage was paid off, with interest due and legal expenses. Michael asked twice over if there were anything more owing in any direction, with a nervous fear that some hidden trap might yet be sprung upon him.

Esther sat by and looked from one to another with her intelligent face bright with interest. The lawyer found himself glancing at her with pleasure, and glad beyond his habit to see the happiness and relief in her sweet face.

They went out *free*.

The sun was hot, and the long high street that steeply sloped to the crowded harbour was bathed in light and life. Michael was very silent; and when Esther, who had been gazing away and away at the jostle of masts and sails showing in the dip of the steep vista, glanced at him, she saw a tear creeping down his cheek, hastily brushed away, while a sigh from the depths of his heart seemed to lift the weight

that had been crushing the life of its beats for so many weary months.

They wandered about the sunny old town too happy to talk. Smiling at each other when their eyes met; and finally sitting down to dinner in the old established inn as joyous as two children on a holiday. After a rest they went out again to look at the shops.

"Do you remember last time, dad?" said Esther. "The curtains, and all the things."

"What do you want this time, lass?" said Michael placidly. "It's your own to spend."

Esther wanted several things, but more for others than herself. Mrs. Fearey and the two old widows held the first place in her mind for necessities. And so many were the parcels that they were finally relegated to come out by the Saturday carrier next day, except a few things that Esther could not part with.

As long as she lived she never forgot the tea that followed, and the evening journey home. The walk out at sunset along the quiet road growing dusky with the long shadows of evening. There was a little stop to be made at the two cottages, when Esther unburdened herself of most of her parcels. And then they went on home. Passing through the little gate they stopped with one accord and looked at the cottage.

The sun dipping behind the cliff to the westward had left the valley in shade, and only touched the chimney and yellow thatch with a last lingering finger.

Birds were asleep, and no sound broke the stillness but a sleepy tweet-tweet from the eaves, and the soft swish of the distant sea. The village seemed a long way off with its faint echoes of voices and laughter.

Esther took hold of her father's hand and gave it a little squeeze, and together they walked slowly up the path.

The following morning Mr. Emmett opened his letters as usual, without a thought of schemes frustrated.

His mind had been at peace since he destroyed Stephen Weld's letter, because he thought matters would shape themselves to his will as usual. Stephen thought Esther was married, and would not hurry home; nor would he be likely to write again; certainly not before the expiration of the fatal year.

The miller had the greatest faith in the power of the thumb-screw he wielded. He could not believe that any one would really submit to lose solid property for such a ridiculous chimera as faith to a dead love! Therefore had he answered Carne's request with such uncompromising decision. He wanted to force them to realize the hopelessness of their position. Esther would change her mind surely at the last, and he would get what he wanted—as he had always done before.

The sight of the solicitor's handwriting was no surprise, as they were in constant correspondence. He opened the letter with indifference, and ran his eye over it. Then he uttered a furious exclamation, and pushed the table from him, upsetting his tea and making the china clatter.

His face flushed a dull crimson from brow to chin, and the veins in his forehead swelled and throbbed, after his manner when very angry. He took up the sheet again and read it through a second time, his hand shaking, and eyes appearing more prominent and bloodshot.

The mortgage paid off, with all interest, and every expense attaching?

The cottage out of his power! Esther out of his power! His desire thwarted; his long cherished plan for getting old Tewkesbury's corner rendered void! His will set at nought by these two people!

His mind leaped forward also, and saw the future.

He had stopped Stephen's letter to no purpose; he could not stop Stephen's return. He would come back now and marry Esther. Joshua Emmett got up from his chair and paced the room in as furious a passion as he had ever indulged in perhaps during the whole course of his life. Impotent fury; the more violent as he knew it was impotent. The blind passionate rage of a dull-tempered tyrannical nature, accustomed to do its own will in all things. If Michael and his daughter had wished to punish him—which they did not—they could not have devised a keener torment than the miller experienced at that moment.

CHAPTER XX

A SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS COMING

FTER that the long summer days passed uneventfully, a lifetime of anxiety, dread, suffering, and relief seemed to have been crowded into that last month. Michael and Esther did not realize until the strain was removed what the effort had been. Carne altered in the month that followed surprisingly to a close observer. There was about him a certain dignity and assurance. The wistful melancholy in his expression, with the tendency to discontent and repining, had given place to a direct glance, and thoughtful placidity which added immensely to the power of his face.

It was as though he had all his life been trying to guess a difficult riddle, putting to it utterly inadequate answers; and now the answer had been revealed, bringing with it a revelation of all troubling problems, and giving peace where there had been no peace.

For Esther the difficulty and struggle were by no means over.

What was the autumn of life for Michael was to her the spring, and it is harder for a young life to surrender all its dreams of pure physical happiness, than for one far more advanced. The longer life has probably experienced the things that young ones hope for, and realized exactly what amount of true happiness they can bring; or, having had the happiness and surrendered it for a time, is willing to wait in peace and hope for the gathering up of the thread again in the light of perfect life beyond. The dread and excitement had been active factors in helping Esther's resolution. But, when it was all over, when the novelty of the relief even had worn off, her trial was hardest; the facing of peaceful, uneventful, everyday life without Stephen.

And even under this strain she did not fail. She made interests. She worked hard. She lived only in the lives of others; never losing her bright spirits; regarding as selfishness the least return of despondent brooding. The two old widows looked to her as sunshine; and Mrs. Fearey loved her with a wholehearted and devoted love. She was a gift of God truly to three lonely ones.

And they were not the only souls whose path was made happier by Esther's love of God.

When the measles attacked the Kentfield family she was an active assistant; nursing Lily on her knee for hours at a time, when that little person resembled nothing so much as a boiled lobster, and reading patiently to young Reube and his brothers, who could be kept in bed by no other influence. When the baby caught a cold after it, and died of pneumonia, Esther was the only person who could restrain poor Mrs. Kentfield's violent grief. Mrs. Saunders' suggestion that when all was said and done seven children were better than eight, being rejected with furious indignation by the woman who whatever her faults was a most loving mother. Esther had *really* loved

the baby, and to her Mrs. Kentfield clung with persistent trust.

The girl's name became associated gradually with comfort and relief.

Summer days faded into autumn. September gales battered on the cliffs, and the wind cried down the valley, driving the drying leaves into the ditches, and sending bits of broken dead wood drifting along before it. The country roads lost their cosy sheltered appearance, and seemed lonely. The sea was grey, and the deep hum of the "bunny," brought back to Esther's mind, with a sickening pang, those three days before the great gale, when the warning roar had echoed along the coast.

The circumstances of Stephen's death returned to her, with the vivid memory that is one of the greatest of the sufferings in loss by death. The constant torment of "*if*" racked her. If she had only told him. If she had only been definite about the miller! If his journey could have been delayed not one day, but twelve hours, the boat would never have put out, or would have gone without him! The weary round of torturing fancy weakened and strained her physically, till her eyes looked unnaturally large, and the pitiful droop returned to the sweet mouth.

"The child's growing thin," said Mrs. Fearey anxiously to Trixie; "she's fretting for the dear lad."

"I must take my girl away somehow for a bit of a change," thought Michael; "she's got her mother's look."

The village began to be sad about Esther, and said she was "not long for this world." They decided that her exceeding gentleness and patience was a kind of death-warrant, and she was watched and considered with pity mingled with awe. Towards the middle of October there came a spell of still, glorious weather; an "Indian" summer, in which the autumn tints blazed with colour, just before the leaves fell. The wind seemed to hold its hand back for the very

beauty of the sight, and the sun set day after day on still, sleeping cliffs, bathed in rosy light, and still rocking, molten sea creeping up the sands as though afraid to disturb the stillness by making itself heard.

A longing to look at the Rocky Cove came upon Esther one day, and she thought that she would go and see the sunset, once, before the calm broke, and get strength to go on bravely through the days to come.

She meant to go before tea, but it so happened that duties interfered, and she did not start till six o'clock, when the autumn day was fast closing in. "It doesn't matter," she thought, "the moon's full; I shall see it rise over Black Rock Head."

"Don't you be late, my girl!" said Carne anxiously; "you're not looking over well to-night!"

"I am well, dear dad!" said Esther; "I want a walk. I feel as if I couldn't breathe indoors, it's so still!"

"I'm going down to the boat for a bit, but don't you be late, or I'll come to the cove and fetch you!"

Esther kissed him, and laughed reassuringly.

Passing the two cottages, she saw Mrs. Fearey sitting at her door knitting.

"I'm off for a walk," said Esther from the gate, "to drive the cobwebs out of my head."

"I wish you'd take my baby," cried Mrs. Fearey, looking over her spectacles. "He's growing so lazy, it's quite a sin. Here, Trixie, go with Esther."

Trixie rose with a look of expostulation.

"Oh, come now, you're not so old as all that," said Mrs. Fearey. "Run along."

Trixie walked down the path, as who should say, "You seem to forget that *running* is for young dogs," but he quickened his pace as Esther opened the gate, and went off with her in a forgiving spirit.

Esther did not want to hurry, and they wandered on over the rough ground till the cliff above the cove was reached. There she sat down on the edge, and looked out to sea.

As far as she could see, out and out, a smooth sleeping plain, greyish-mauve, with the memory of sunset tints, and not yet under the sway of the moon, which hung in the clear sky, waiting to reign in all her majesty. The water crept to the foot of the cliffs with a rhythmic "hush," drawing back each time with a little murmur that followed on all down the line till it was lost in the distance. Far away the bark of a dog, or a faint echo of distant laughter came up on the soft air from the land, and was carried out to the fishing-boats that drifted with the swell.

"No stir in the air; no stir in the sea," came into the girl's mind as she sat brooding over the vision at her feet.

The dog sat down on her dress, and pressing against her seemed to be asleep.

Minutes passed, and Esther sat buried in deepest thought, unconscious of the flight of time. Only by her face might you tell that her thoughts were prayers, and the great longing and loneliness of her heart was searching, not in vain, for a strong Rest that it might find courage for the work to come.

The moon grew in strength that washed the cliffs in silver, and a road of shining light lay lightly on the water, making the restless movement of the sea visible, and the hulls of the boats that crossed it look as though they were painted on it in Indian ink.

All sound from the land had ceased, when on the silence broke the faint tramp of a far, far distant foot-fall. Coming up to the cove from the Rockhampton side, with a quick, regular step it marked itself on the intense silence.

Esther listened perforce.

"A coastguard," she thought uninterested. "Fancy hearing him all that distance off! it must be still; one seems to hear the silence." And she settled down again to her quiet watching.

The distant footstep sounded louder, and the on-

comer began to whistle a scrap of tune. Esther felt the dog's body against her side become suddenly tense. A tremble passed over his old limbs, and he raised his grey head to listen. Esther laid a reassuring hand on his coat, and stroked him gently.

"Nothing, Baby, dear, but the coastguard."

Trixie wagged his tail and replied to her with a little whine, but he did not cease listening for one second.

The coming step approached the broken slope on the other side of the cove, and the whistling ceased, giving place to a scrambling run and a jump or two that led to the sands at the bottom.

Trixie raised himself stiffly in spite of Esther's detaining arm, he shivered and trembled through every rigid limb, a stifled gruff bark at the back of his throat broken every now and then by a crying whine.

"Baby, you're silly," said Esther, whispering and coaxing. "It's only the coastguard."

But the dog took no notice of her; the step was now stumbling up the rocky path from the cove, and the dog struggled to get away from her. Against her will and reason a strange excitement took possession of the girl.

The memory of another night rushed into her mind when Stephen had come up out of the cove to meet with her on the top, just where she stood now, and they had walked home talking of the miller. Wonder at herself, as she was then, flashed through Esther's mind; wonder at her own miserable blindness that played with foolish things of tinsel glitter and let the treasure pass unnoticed. Her heart beat fast with the vivid memory.

She got up from her seat on the ground, and in so doing loosed her hold of Trixie who raced wildly off, stumbling, jumping, scrambling, squeaking, whining, and barking. The still night was positively torn and shattered by the sudden burst of noise.

Esther felt annoyance, the memory was jarred and

the dream broken. Life and its reality hurt her again with a sharp pain. It was long, long ago that Steve had come up out of the cove, now Steve was dead, and her life was to be but a waiting-time till the time came to follow.

The man and the dog had met. Esther heard a deep voice speak, but the noise and fuss the dog made drowned its tone, and she only thought it must be some one Trixie knew well. Up they came, the man moving quicker, and she strolled a step or two towards the head of the path and waited, the brilliant moonlight shining on her and lighting every feature, almost every eyelash.

A man sprang up the last steep bit, out of the shadow on to the cliff. He carried a small bundle, and the dog followed closely at his heels. It was not the figure of any Durlmouth man now living; the great height, breadth, and carriage of head recalled with a sudden shock of pitiful remembrance, one man, only one man, for there had been no other like him.

A few yards divided them; he, with his back to the light, motionless; she with the moon bathing her plaintive face and deep eyes, gazing—gazing—motionless also.

It was not possible! The days of miracles were gone, and dead men no longer returned, given back from the grave to the women who loved them.

"Esther—you!"

He suddenly broke the silence, and his tone was almost one of awe, because *this* was not the same Esther he had left. This most beautiful woman, whose face was stamped with the pathos of deep grief and long patience; whose soft deep eyes searched him with such terrible agony of question. At the sound of his voice she gave a choked cry, raised both her hands towards him, and dropped them again.

Stephen's eyes quickly glanced at the slim left hand so white in the moonlight.

There was no wedding-ring on it.

He made a forward step. His heart beat so loud that he could hear it himself; Esther might have heard it in the stillness, it made his voice husky.

"Esther!—won't you speak—to me, now?"

She put out her hand, like one in a dream, and laid it on his breast.

The touch awoke her; the labouring heart beneath her hand was living, human in its wild beats. Neither knew which moved first; it was the impulse of one heart that stirred both. In a moment she was wrapped in his arms, close to the heart that had beat for her so long and so bravely, alone.

"Steve—Steve—Steve!"—only his name, murmured again and again, with a soft breathless wonder.

"Didn't you think I should come then, sweet?" he whispered, with his cheek against her hair.

A slim hand stole up to his face, and touched him gently, with trembling finger-tips.

"How could I?—I saw you—drown." She clung closer to him with a shudder.

Stephen laughed, a little short, joyous laugh with a sob in it.

"You never did—darling,—you thought you did. But the letter told all about it. Didn't aunt show you the letter?"

Esther paused to collect her thoughts, then she lifted her head and looked up into his face.

"There—there was no letter."

"*No letter!* I sent one from Vancouver in May. Didn't aunt get a money-order?"

"She got nothing. No letter, nothing. We thought you were dead—all the time."

Stephen was disturbed; but the lovely face looking up so close, in its shy amaze and almost fearful happiness swept away all other thoughts, and he bent his head.

"Darling—mine!"

Esther passed her hand round the back of his neck, and drawing his head down, kissed his lips, with a gentle dignity that brought a sob to his throat.

Minutes passed and they did not speak, only the language that needs no words passed between them, healing all the bitter scars, telling the story of the long loneliness; and, in the telling bringing with it a unity of soul that is only known to the few who have met real love face to face and know it for what it is.

"But, sweetheart," said Stephen presently. "Then just now you thought me dead."

Esther looked at him dreamily.

"I didn't—think. You were in my heart—and I saw you. I didn't know if it was a dream. I was afraid to wake."

"I was in your heart," said Stephen. "*I* in your heart." In his tone there was something of awe. The thought was too great to grasp lightly.

"*Always* in my heart," said Esther earnestly,—“ever since—since I knew I'd—lost you.”

And as she looked up into the strong brown face, and answered the steadfast grey eyes that had been to her but an agonized memory, the realization of it all swept into her soul, overwhelming her with a passion of tears.

Clinging to him she called his name, under her breath, again and again; holding him with a nervous grasp that seemed to find relief only in the very texture of his clothing.

Stephen soothed her with loving whispers; stroking her hair; holding her hands; telling her to look up and be comforted, with a sense of thankful joy that possessed her to the depth of her being.

By bits and scraps all the story was pieced together. The difficulty was, at first, to realize that Stephen thought they knew he was alive; and Esther told hers from the other standpoint. He did not ask her for any details of the breaking off of the miller's

courtship. What she said was enough. That she had loved him without knowing it; and at the last hoped he would speak, realizing, when he was gone, that she must be his only, and always.

"And you'd have kept to me, you say you'd have kept to me—if it had been as you thought?" said Stephen, his voice trembling.

"I couldn't have helped it," said Esther, with her head on his breast, and her deep eyes shining with a great contentment.

Stephen held her close, but he could find no words to tell his heart in answer.

Presently Esther said, smiling—

"Do you know I'm very selfish. Think of me keeping you here, and little auntie sitting at home not knowing, let alone dad thinking I'm lost. Look at Trixie; he's quite silly with joy."

The old dog had been sitting patiently watching them, his mouth a little open; every now and then a whine of pleasure expressing his feelings. They turned homewards, laughing happily, and holding hands like two children, while Trixie crowded in between, and they both stumbled over him at intervals.

As they entered the road they heard a quick step coming along the hedges. The dog barked.

"Esther, is that you?" called out Michael's voice. "Do you know what time it is?"

Esther left Stephen's side and ran on.

"Hullo!" said Carne, as he saw her face.

"Oh, dad!" She stopped in front of him, and her words came unconnected, hesitating. "Think of the most wonderful miracle that could be. I don't know how to tell it—but it's true—not a dream—I'm not crazy—listen!" and she held up her hand.

Michael stared at her, and listened. A quick step was coming up the road behind her.

"It's true—it is—dad, it's *his* step; he was never drowned."

"Merciful God!" said Michael in a startled voice. He said no more, but he took off his cap, and stood gazing at the coming figure.

"The thing is, how to break this to your aunt," said Carne presently, as the three turned homewards. "We mustn't be sudden with her, lad, she's had so much to bear."

"What a pity Trixie can't speak!" said Esther. "He can do everything but speak."

After all, Trixie became the chief agent in the matter. As the three approached the cottages, Trixie decided that a second burst of triumph was essential, and gathering himself together he set off home at a scrambling pace, forced the gate open, rushed up the path and fell upon Mrs. Fearey, who was standing at the open door listening for Esther, with a frenzied demonstration. He shrieked and whined, barked and squealed, dragging at her apron, shaking it violently to and fro, and entangling himself recklessly in her skirts.

"Bless the dog, what is it?" said the little woman, stooping to soothe him. "What is it you want to tell mother, Baby?"

As she stroked his head he ceased to make a noise, but gazed into her eyes with intensity of meaning and a dumb language.

Footsteps were at the gate. And Mrs. Fearey heard a voice, a whispered colloquy, answered in a low, deep tone. Crouching on the dog she stared into the gloom. More than two figures, and one very tall!

She raised herself up and called aloud in a quavering tone.

"My lad, my lad, it's you come back," and fell in a little heap on the top of Trixie.

It was the first and only time that Mrs. Fearey ever fainted; she looked upon it with shame afterwards as an unpardonable weakness. Half-an-hour afterwards she was trotting about the house getting Stephen's bedroom ready, with tears running down her cheeks.

Trixie was in everybody's way, especially Mrs. Fearey, who fell over him with her arms full of bed-clothes, exclaiming—

"Bless the dog, where'll he be coming to next?" with unimpaired good temper and delight.

Stephen went down to The Corner with Michael; and Esther sat listening, as cheer after cheer rang out on the still night air—for the news spread, and men got out of bed and rushed down to shake his hand and welcome him back to Durlmouth.

The children heard it and shouted in their beds; the women heard it and wiped their eyes, crying and laughing together over the story of true love. Mr. Newman heard it on the high cliff, and insisted on going off with his wife to see what was doing, and if the wonderful rumour brought by breathless Dave was really a fact.

"I suppose we shall have a wedding soon?" said Mrs. Newman, all smiles.

"To-morrow, if I had my way," answered Stephen, and a roar of shouts went up.

Walking back home with Michael as soon as he could tear himself away, Stephen suddenly stopped in the road as a thought flashed into his mind.

"About the trouble—the money part, Mr. Carne; you'll trust me to pay it all off. At any rate, you'll let me help, now you've given me the right."

Michael answered with a little happy laugh—

"Thanks to the mercy of God, Steve, we've been saved and free from fear this long while." He paused at Stephen's exclamation, and then added—"But didn't Esther tell you?"

"We'd no time to talk about money," said Stephen.

"No time!" echoed Michael. "No *time*—bless your hearts, what a thing it is to be in love!"

Then he told the story of the buried coat, of Esther's and Trixie's discovery, and what it had meant to them. He even told the younger man

something of the pressure put upon Esther ; of how her love had borne the strain, and only grown in depth and strength.

"And she thought I was dead," said Stephen, standing still, glad that the night hid his face, even from Esther's father.

"It made no difference," said Carne, "you were not dead to her. Esther is a good bit changed, Steve ; she was always a sweet girl, but she's something more than that now."

"I saw her face," said Stephen. "God help me to be worthy of her."

They walked to the gate in silence ; there the light streamed down the path from the open door, and Esther met them with a radiant smile of love and peace in her eyes.

"What a long while you've been !" she said.

Mrs. Fearey was hovering behind in the doorway, and Trixie, conscious of distinguished services, again greeted Stephen with much demonstration.

"Come in, come in," cried Mrs. Fearey, "we've been counting the minutes. Lie down, Baby, directly, this minute. I never did see such a dog, you can't hear yourself speak. What with finding the money, being master of the house all this while, and the first to find Stephen too, he's getting so heady you can't do anything with him. There, come to mother this very minute and lie quiet, or you'll get such a name for bad manners that Esther and Stephen will never ask you to tea when they're married."

THE END

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